

ABSTRACT

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

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WOMEN OF POWER, SISTERS OF FAITH: A CASE STUDY OF THE WOMEN BISHOPS OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Dissertation dated May 2007

This study provides an account and analysis of the role of women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and discusses their attempts to achieve equal status with men in service to and leadership in the church. The study also examines and analyzes the personal style, skills and abilities of each of the women bishops and assesses the factors that led to her election.

A case study approach was used to explain the causal links that have led to the historic election of three women bishops; to describe the context in which this event has occurred; to explore the issues and outcomes of women's efforts to gain leadership in the church; and to evaluate the likelihood that these elections signify far-reaching changes in the policy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The researcher found that the progress of women within the African Methodist Episcopal Church has been slow but consistent throughout the history of the church, and that changes in society as well as within the church itself have culminated in the election of women as bishops. Although future elections of women can be expected based on events to date, the researcher did not achieve a definitive assertion from the women

bishops that they intend to actively engage in the promotion of the advancement of women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

WOMEN OF POWER, SISTERS OF FAITH: A CASE STUDY
OF THE WOMEN BISHOPS OF THE AFRICAN
METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF ARTS IN HUMANITIES

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2007

P: 1-16
P: 172

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks go to all those who assisted me in the completion of this dissertation – my interview partners, who so generously gave of their time and resources; the expert consultants who provided me with information and insights about the African Methodist Episcopal Church; and my professors and dissertation committee, whose expert guidance and encouragement helped me complete this undertaking. I would like to thank my family: my daughter, Shironda Ahera Alethia White, who provided technical and editorial assistance; my son, Jamu Garonda White, who provided consistent support and inspiration; my extended family, who provided unwavering confidence in my ability to complete the dissertation; and my colleagues at Clark Atlanta University for their continued support and encouragement. To the memory of my parents, Clyde Waters, Sr. and Matalene Bledsoe Waters, for the enduring inspiration of their lives and their unfailing confidence in me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
A. Statement of the Problem	1
B. The African Methodist Episcopal Church.	16
C. Conceptual Framework	24
D. Methodology	28
E. Data Collection.	29
F. The Research Questions	31
G. Organization of the Dissertation	31
H. Definition of Terms.	32
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	37
III. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH	56
IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: THE WOMEN BISHOPS OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH	
A. Vashti Murphy McKenzie	80
B. Carolyn Tyler Guidry	86
C. Sarah Frances Davis	98
D. Summary	105
E. Findings	106
V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
A. Conclusions	133

B. Recommendations	156
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APPENDICES

1. Appendix A: Resolution to Set Aside	165
2. Appendix B: General Conference African Methodist Episcopal Church Special Resolution July 2000	166

BIBLIOGRAPHY	168
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This is a case study of the first three women elected bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The objective of this research is to discuss how women have undertaken their quest to gain equality with their male counterparts in service to and leadership in the church and to analyze and relate the personal journey, including skills and abilities, of each of the women who has thus far surmounted existing barriers to attain the office of bishop. This study serves as a continuation of the work of womanist theologians who have investigated the roles women of the AME Church have carved out for themselves before access to the bishopric was attained.

Statement of the Problem

For centuries, women in Western cultures have been considered the primary carriers of religion, with the responsibility of teaching their children and of sustaining religious and spiritual values within the family.¹ Somewhat paradoxically, however, women have traditionally been denied an active role in the leadership of the church. Most religious institutions have traditionally prohibited women from having an active role as leaders in the church. The most familiar of these institutions, the Roman Catholic

¹ Joyce Russell-Robinson, "Defiance and Hope: The Christian Temperament in Nineteenth Century African-American Women's Narratives" in *Perspectives on Womanist Theology*, Jacquelyn Grant, ed. (Atlanta: Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center, 1995), 25.

Church, remains adamantly opposed to women serving as priests or in other roles traditionally reserved for men. This practice, however, has come under increasingly intense scrutiny in both the Catholic and the Protestant churches. The Protestant church has proven to be more amenable to the increased participation of women, and many of the traditional restrictions have fallen during recent years.

Historically, women have been tenacious in their resistance to the lack of equal opportunity to serve in the church, and contended with church leaders in an effort to gain a more inclusive role in all aspects of service and leadership. Modern women continue to protest those restrictions that remain and have continued the fight for more inclusion. Nonetheless, social traditions and practices for much of the history of the Christian church have appeared to endorse church policies. Consequently, women found little sympathy for their efforts to change those policies, and the idea that religious leaders are most appropriately male remained the prevalent social reality for centuries. In recent decades, however, the religious institutions and denominations that have prohibited women from a more active role as participants and leaders in the church have come under increasingly intense approbation, particularly by religious scholars and theologians. Some denominations have responded by increasing access for women within their churches. Others, like the Roman Catholic Church, have consistently refused to consider such action.²

Despite a call for the advancement of women's roles in the church by at least two committees of Catholic bishops in the United States—in addition to the millions of

² Tara Dix and Heather Grennan Gary, compilers, "Women Take Center Stage in New Vatican Document," *U.S. Catholic* (October 2004).

Catholic women and men calling for substantial change—the Vatican has not only refused to heed such requests, but has issued a formal address reaffirming its views on the status of women in the church and the world. Signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who has since been elected Pope Benedict XVI, the document is titled *On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World*. Voicing criticism of feminism for what it terms its emphasis on the subordination of women, the document links feminism to conflicts between men and women and levels the charge that the feminist movement is “blurring the differences between the sexes.” Although the document lauds feminist values as beneficial to society, it does not address the issues of most concern to many women – those of women in the priesthood and birth control. It endorses women’s right to access to the “world of work . . . and access to positions of responsibility,”³ in the workplace, but such access to the church is not extended. The documents, which include “From Words to Deeds: Continuing Reflections of the Role of Women in the Church” from the bishops’ Committee on Women in Society and the Church and “Ten Frequently Asked Questions About the Reservation of Priestly Ordination to Men,” which came from the Committee on Doctrine, explain why their recommendation for women’s advancement does not include ordination as priests.⁴

On the other hand, while some Protestant denominations, among them the Church of God in Christ, continue to exercise specific prohibitions against women, in the past few decades, other denominations have relaxed many of their restrictions on women’s leadership. Since the mid-twentieth century, Protestant church denominations have

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Women’s Advancement but Not Ordination,” *America* Vol. 179 Issue 13 (October 31, 1998).

significantly advanced women's presence in the church, both in ministry and in positions of leadership. A small number have allowed women access to the highest levels of church leadership. In the United Methodist Church, for example, scores of women now serve as ministers, and a dozen or more have been elevated to the office of bishop. Fifteen women have been elected bishop in the Episcopal Church; other Protestant churches, among them the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, have also relaxed restrictions, enabling women to move into the ministry and, in recent years, into the episcopacy.⁵

The African Methodist Episcopal Church is among those church denominations that have seen significant change in opportunities for women over the past few decades. Women endured a multitude of pressures and obstacles in order to serve in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, from having to defend and explain their call to ministry to the knowledge that their success or failure would affect the reception of the women who came after them. They also knew that they needed to be not just as good as, but better than a man in the same position if they were to succeed.⁶ Early women preachers braved public censure or worse for daring to answer the call to ministry. In eighteenth-century Virginia, "Elizabeth" was threatened with arrest for preaching in public. Jarena Lee was refused ordination and her continuing efforts to gain official recognition challenged. Rebecca Cox Jackson contended with threats on her life and accusations that she was

⁵The AME Church officially allowed ordination of women beginning in 1964; in 2000, Vashti McKenzie was the first woman elected bishop in the denomination. See Jualynne Dodson, *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church* (Latham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002).

⁶ Vashti M. McKenzie, *Not Without A Struggle: Leadership Development for African-American Women in Ministry* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 67.

undermining the church. Nevertheless, women of all denominations have neither faltered in their struggle nor abandoned their quest for equal status and access to leadership and power in the church.

The prevailing social belief for hundreds of years has been that women are not suited to serve in ministry. Women as a whole are generally regarded favorably in matters of spirituality and religion; however, female clergy have just as routinely been derogated when it comes to church administration.⁷ For the most part, clergywomen are accused of being too soft and too weak to effectively handle the day-to-day responsibilities of running a church. Those who sought full participation in the church refused to accede to social and cultural restraints placed upon them; these stereotypes, they believed, originated with man and not God. Prathia Hall Wynn stated it in this way: "... the same God who made me a preacher is the same God who made me a woman. And, I am convinced that God was not confused on either count."⁸ The concept of "the call" to preach remained a powerful influence on women who were convinced they were obeying the command of God in entering the ministry.⁹ At some point, many women determined that it was more important to answer God's call than to be concerned with whether men thought they should preach the gospel.

Women have always been an integral part of the church, albeit in roles prescribed for them by others. The effort to gain a greater degree of involvement in church

⁷ Jacquelyn Grant, *Perspectives on Womanist Theology* (Atlanta: Interdenominational Theological Center Press, 1995), 26.

⁸ Marcia Y. Riggs, *Plenty Good Room* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 83.

⁹ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 278.

leadership would seem a natural outgrowth of their participation, but their efforts were met with concerted and persistent opposition by those who would circumscribe their access to positions of power.¹⁰ Because there were such sparse opportunities for paid, full-time positions in the institutional church, many women opted for an increased role in “parachurch” nontraditional ministries as a means of fulfilling their desire to serve. Only gradually did women gain the support needed for a more expanded, official role.

McKenzie writes that advancement to higher positions came through the support of feminist and other “liberation” perspectives.¹¹ Women began by serving in whatever roles were available to them, even if it meant they were not ordained into the ministry. Increasingly, as they were accepted and even welcomed into quasi-ministerial roles, they began to move beyond traditional entry-level, or “auxiliary-style” appointments. Meanwhile, individual women continued to seek full ordination; some of their efforts met with success, although most did not.¹² The primary focus, though, was on service rather than ordination for a large number of women, who disregarded the restrictions on formal recognition and endorsement to continue in the roles they had developed for themselves.

The effort to gain formal ordination continued, however, and by the end of the twentieth century, nearly all “mainline” denominations had dropped restrictions on female ordination. In a few instances, access was gained very early on. For example, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America began ordaining women as ruling elders in

¹⁰ Lincoln, 298.

¹¹ McKenzie, 43.

¹² Lincoln, 297.

the late nineteenth century,¹³ although it was not until 1955 that the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. North began to offer women full ordination. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. South followed in 1964.¹⁴ Twelve years later, the Episcopal Church first ordained women to the ministry. Although eleven women were actually ordained in the Episcopal Church in 1974, the ordination was deemed "irregular" and not recognized by the church because women were not officially ordained at that time. In 1976, however, these eleven women were officially recognized as duly ordained ministers in the Episcopal Church, ending two years of turmoil. The United Methodist Church's first female bishop, Marjorie Swank Matthews, was consecrated in 1980. The Anglican Communion further advanced women's position in the church in 1984 with the elevation of Barbara Harris, who had the dual distinction of being the first African-American bishop and the first woman bishop in the Anglican Church. The Episcopal Church has ordained hundreds of women since 1974; as of 2002, fifteen women had been consecrated bishop. Most recently, on June 18, 2006, Katherine Jefferts Schori was elected presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, making her the titular head of the entire denomination.¹⁵

Major European American denominations proved to be more amenable to women in ministry and accessibility to leadership before the black church. While white women were successful in breaching limitations to their full participation as ministers as early as the 1800s, the first ordination of women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church did not occur until 1948. In some instances, black women were ordained by white

¹³ McKenzie, 35.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Neela Banjerlee, "Woman is Named Episcopal Leader", *New York Times* Vol. 155 Issue 53615 June 19, 2006, p. A1.

denominations before gaining that right within the black church. In 1977, Pauli Murray became the first African-American female priest in the Episcopal Church. Leontine Kelly became the first African-American woman bishop in the worldwide Anglican Communion when she was consecrated on July 20, 1984. The consecration of Barbara C. Harris a bishop on February 11, 1984 by the Anglican Church predated the selection of Vashti McKenzie in the African Methodist Episcopal Church by almost twenty years. Nevertheless, in all churches and at all levels, both black and white women have experienced formidable obstacles in surmounting the barriers imposed upon their full participation in the church.

Julia Foote was the first woman to be fully ordained in any Methodist denomination. Asserting that "... there is one Methodist Episcopal Church that guarantees to women all rights in common with men," Bishop James Walker Hood ordained Julia Foote deacon at the 73rd Session of the New York Annual Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church on May 20, 1894.¹⁶ In 1895, Mary J. Small was ordained deacon by Bishop Alexander Walters. She was subsequently ordained elder by Bishop Calvin Pettey in 1898, two years before Julia Foote transferred to the New Jersey conference and was ordained elder by Bishop Walters.¹⁷ The African Methodist Episcopal Church, in contrast, continued to resist ordination of women by practice and polity until the second half of the twentieth century.

Even before official limitations on women's participation in church leadership were relaxed, women found ways to engage in significant leadership roles within their

¹⁶ Lincoln, 479.

¹⁷ Ibid.

churches, establishing a legacy that continues into the present day.¹⁸ Despite the fact that they were not granted a hearing when they claimed a call to preach or a desire for leadership positions, through unremitting hard work and unceasing challenges, women succeeded in establishing important traditions of service and participation in their denominations despite official sanctions.¹⁹ According to Carol M. Norén, most early preaching women did not consider ordination an issue. Nineteenth-century women who felt the call to preach did not necessarily see it as a call to ordination, since at that time, a great many male preachers entered the ministry after receiving a license, without being ordained.²⁰ In her autobiography, Amanda Berry Smith reinforces this perception that women of the AME Church were not always seeking ordination in their service to the church. In early 1870, Smith determined that she would like to attend the AME General Conference in Nashville. Knowing nothing about how one arranged such an undertaking, Mrs. Smith approached several male delegates for information. When she first asked these men how she could attend the conference and what it would cost, they responded negatively, telling her that the cost would be too much for her. She persisted, and seeing that she was intent on attending the conference, they entered into an exchange between themselves, essentially ignoring her:

“What does she want to go for?” “Woman preacher; they want to be ordained,” was the reply. “I mean to fight that thing,” said the other. “Yes, indeed, so will I,” said another. Then a slight look to see if I took it in. I did, but in spite of it all I believed God would have me go. He knew that the thought of ordination had never once entered my mind, for I had

¹⁸ See Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “The Role of Women in the Sanctified Church,” *Journal of Religious Thought* Vol. 43 Issue 1 (Spring, Summer 1986), 24.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Carol M. Norén, *The Woman in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 12.

received my ordination from Him²¹

Mrs. Smith was a neophyte at AME General Conference, and in her naiveté, she had not made arrangements for living quarters at the conference. She assumed, erroneously as it transpired, that she would find a warm welcome on her arrival. On the contrary, she was snubbed repeatedly by both men and women based on nothing but her unpretentious attire and demeanor. Mrs. Smith recounts, she was not welcomed at the conference, but rather “. . . was eyed with critical suspicion as being there to agitate the question of the ordination of women.”²² Others whom she encountered at the conference also thought she was there to advance the cause of women’s ordination. However, Smith says, the question of female ordination actually never came up. Like many other things in life, she did not think this so remarkable. Smith believed that God would work out this issue in His own time and in His own way without intervention on her part. She stated, “How often I have stood still and seen God overrule things of man’s device, and work His sovereign will.”²³

Other early women preachers expressed much the same sentiment, continuing their work as missionaries, evangelists, exhorters and the like without taking the time to protest the limitations under which they labored. Smith implies that she did not have the time or the energy to devote to such efforts; she was too busy doing God’s work. This attitude seems to have been prevalent among women who went about the work they

²¹ Amanda Berry Smith. *An Autobiography: the story of the Lord’s dealings with Mrs. Amanda Berry Smith, the colored evangelist: containing an account of her life work of faith, and her travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa, as an independent missionary* (Chicago: Meyer and Brother, 1893), 200.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 364.

believed they were called to do in the expectation that God, in His own time, would resolve the issue to His satisfaction. Although women like Jarena Lee petitioned for the granting of a license to preach, they did not allow refusal to stop their work. Lee continued to evangelize, exhort and preach for many years. Smith was a member of the AME Church, and does not indicate in her autobiography whether she ever approached the leadership of the church for any recognition beyond that which she enjoyed as an evangelist. Her autobiography indicates that she undertook her work at the urging of the Spirit, unconcerned with the opinions of either men or women in the church. At one point, she considered leaving the AME Church because of the disrespect and suspicion her claims of sanctification brought upon her. She found that on many occasions she was not allowed to worship in peace. When a new minister was sent to the church she attended, he was much more critical of her than his predecessor had been. On his first day in the pulpit, Reverend Nelson Turpin publicly ridiculed her. She relates how he spoke contemptuously of those who claimed to be sanctified:

“They put on a plain bonnet and shawl and wear a long face, but they are sanctified Devils!” Then all eyes would be turned on Sister Scott and myself, for we were about the only ones that dressed in the way described.²⁴

Unhappy with the atmosphere in her church, Mrs. Smith was led by the Spirit to Union Church in New York. Although the members of this church did not believe in the doctrine of holiness, she believed she would be better treated there. Her claims of the blessing of sanctification were met with great criticism, however, and she determined that she would remain silent about the subject. One evening at Love Feast, however, she

²⁴ Ibid., 110.

could not resist the touch upon her spirit, and rising, she spoke extemporaneously for over ten minutes. She was gratified to receive a response from the church and from the ministers in the pulpit.²⁵

Throughout her experiences in various churches, Amanda Berry Smith continued to wrestle with her calling and her belief in sanctification. Where she found resistance, she would often suffer in silence, asking God not for conversion of her tormenters, but for strength to endure their censure.

Some observers speculate that women began to demand ordination because of the phenomenal increase in the numbers of women seeking formal seminary education in preparation for ministry. Already prepared academically, they set their sights on official sanction and recognition of their ministries. For many decades, however, women did not actively seek ordination and official recognition of their call to preach.

In earlier generations, women were expected to place first priority on serving their families. Any desire by a woman to speak out in public was seen as unnatural and offensive to the social conventions of the time. If married to a clergyman, she would include support of his ministry in her responsibilities, but never to the extent of taking a position of prominence. If not a minister's wife, she still threw some of her energies into support of the church. Choices for women who expressed a desire to minister were limited insofar as entering the pulpit, but they found ample other areas in which to serve. Some practiced a ministry outside the church, while others accepted the limited roles the church allowed them. Some women ignored what they believed to be a divine commandment, because they saw no opportunity to fulfill that calling. They drew some

²⁵ Ibid., 111.

satisfaction from working in the various programs of the church-- Sunday School, fund-raisers, choir, and other activities.

From the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, women continued to develop functional roles within the church-- from public speakers, to administrators, managers and teachers. They were revivalists, educators, and missionaries. They endured every obstacle from public censure to threats of bodily harm. In an earlier section, mention was made of Elizabeth, an eighteenth century preaching woman who was threatened with arrest in Virginia; Jarena Lee, a member of the early African Methodist Episcopal Church, who was challenged by both church and society; and Rebecca Cox Jackson, who received death threats for her efforts to follow her calling.²⁶ The pressures and obstacles endured by women who sought to serve the church were multitudinous, yet they continued to strive to fulfill their call to service despite these conditions.

In the nineteenth century, the number of female itinerant and local preachers, exhorters and prayer leaders increased sharply as more women took a more active role in the church. They served in such areas as education, social work, nursing, and evangelism. A number of women served as missionaries or as deaconesses. Deaconesses had limited power, reporting to the pastor, the superintendent, the church board, or to the bishop. Women's departments operated somewhat more autonomously. Many women became missionaries, and tangentially found that they enjoyed a great degree of social autonomy in this capacity. In Jim Crow America, missionaries in the black church were able to enjoy an unprecedented degree of freedom in their capacity as emissaries within their communities. Cloaked in the respectability of their office, they were able to travel

²⁶ Lincoln, 279.

and interact with society in a manner not allowed females in the South at a time when both black men and black women were at risk of harm from a racist and hostile society. This was an unexpected boon to their commitment to serve the church. Some nineteenth-century women were “more apt to work independently,” or to seek out “smaller denominations with a strong social-cultural identity” where they would be welcomed.²⁷ In contemporary times, the number of women clergy has increased dramatically despite unpromising prospects of advancement. In the period between 1977 and 1986, the total number of female ministers in the United States increased by ninety-eight percent.²⁸ This is a reflection of the increased numbers of women who have entered and seminary during this period. In 1972, only ten percent of all students enrolled in Protestant seminaries were women; by 1986, that number had increased to twenty-six percent.²⁹ Carol Norén’s research during the late 1980s revealed that few women seminary students said they faced much resistance or many impediments to entering the ministry. Despite the increasing numbers of women attaining a seminary degree or even ordination, however, they still face obstacles when it is time for assignments as head pastor of a church.

Women in the black church face other and different issues. The black church is defined by Lincoln and Mamiya as those churches that are independent, totally black, founded after the Free African Society of 1787.³⁰ Author Marcia Y. Riggs expands that definition to include congregations-- which may be “mainline white” denominations--

²⁷ Norén, 26.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Lincoln, 279.

where African-Americans predominate, as well as congregations and leaders of independent, historically black-controlled denominations and members and leaders in local congregations within white mainline denominations.³¹

It is possible that Riggs oversimplifies her definition of the black church as a segment of a white denomination. Even where blacks predominate in today's interracial churches, they may make no effort to hold the church accountable to engage black issues and concerns. It might be more likely that the black membership makes a concerted effort to avoid so-called "black issues" and has no desire to see that changed.

Many churchwomen find a great degree of satisfaction in serving and running the various women's organizations of the black church. In many instances, these organizations operate almost entirely independently of any outside control or authority except for nominal oversight by the pastor. However, although women still control women's organizations within the black church, their authority in other areas of church life must continually be "negotiated and approved by male gatekeepers."³² The status of women is even more problematic when one considers the role of the black church in the struggle for equality and justice in America. Both Riggs and Dodson assert that the black church fails to live up to its theological and ethical beliefs when it practices the kind of sexual and gender bias evidenced in the limitation of women's roles in the church. Dodson cites the successful sexual harassment lawsuit won, in 1999, by a female pastor

³¹Riggs, 128.

³²Ibid., 83.

against the AME Church,³³ as well as the continued limitations on women in ministry.

According to Riggs, the black church appears to have no intention of taking the steps necessary to eradicate its sexism:

I . . . [am] an ethicist who is deeply concerned about the distorted relationship between the professed theological and ethical beliefs and moral practices with respect to gender in [the black church]. In particular, I am concerned with the way that we reinterpret our beliefs about justice in order to match our sexual-gender oppressive practices while maintaining that we "received" such interpretation by way of the Bible and/or church tradition.³⁴

Riggs investigates the black church as "a site of sexual-gender oppression in which male power operates consciously and unconsciously to create sexism . . ." and analyzes " . . . how such . . . oppression is mediated through ecclesial practices."³⁵

The African Methodist Episcopal Church

The challenge for women clergy in the African Methodist Episcopal Church—as in many other Christian denominations—is rooted in the church's interpretation of the scriptural basis of Christian theology and the resultant patriarchal structure of the church. For the first 214 years of the existence of the AME Church, women faced a variety of challenges to their desire for service. Between the founding of the church in 1816 and the relaxation of doctrine in 1964, women were first refused the right to preach and then

³³ Reverend Sandra McFadden, pastor of Mariah Walker African Methodist Episcopal Church in Kansas City, Missouri, charged that Presiding Elder P. Albert Williams had repeatedly harassed her "year after year" by touching her, culminating in groping her breasts in the church. Four months after her official complaint about the groping incident, on December 13, 1996, McFadden was removed from her pulpit and her AME membership revoked. After failing to obtain an official apology from the church and the removal of Presiding Elder Williams from office, she filed suit. In December 1999, Reverend McFadden was awarded a \$4.5 million dollar judgment against the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Presiding Elder P. Albert Williams, and Bishop Vernon Byrd of the Fifth District for sexual harassment.

³⁴ Riggs, 11.

³⁵ Ibid.

the right of ordination. These prohibitions were spelled out clearly in every edition of the *Discipline and Doctrine of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* before 1964.

Women eventually won the right to ordination after more than a century of agitation. After that restriction was lifted, the African Methodist Episcopal Church followed a doctrine that prohibited women from holding positions in the episcopacy, the level of bishop.³⁶ Although there was no official written policy that prevented women from holding the office of bishop, practice and tradition continued to limit their access to that office. It took one hundred thirty-two years for women to win ordination; another fifty-two years passed before they reached the final level of authority in the church.

The election of one woman to the episcopacy at the General Conference of 2000, and of an additional two women at the General Conference of 2004, signaled radical changes within the church. These changes could impact aspects of church policy regarding when and where women are empowered to serve. It might be expected that, as these three women have gained access to the highest levels of Episcopal leadership, more women will be enabled to achieve positions of similar stature. This study addresses the possibility and likelihood that the election of these women signaled so far-reaching a change.

Some question whether the church has, in fact, undergone such a dramatic change. In July 2000, shortly after the election of Vashti McKenzie at the AME General Conference, writer David Briggs charged that the election of McKenzie had really done

³⁶ The AME church structure is based on the episcopacy, which refers to its form of government; the chief executive and administrative officers of the church are the bishops, who are elected and receive authority from the General Conference, which is held every four years. The bishops oversee the temporal and spiritual affairs of the church, preside over the annual conferences, appoint pastors, ordain ministers, and are generally responsible for promoting the interests of the church (*Know Your Church Manual*, 1965, 22).

very little to change the power structure of the AME Church. Briggs wrote that McKenzie's victory was due to the same "old-boy network" that had always controlled the church:

. . . McKenzie guaranteed her election the old-fashioned way – in a back-of-the-hall political deal with male leaders. When she was one of the top four vote-getters on the first ballot, McKenzie huddled with the other three camps, and they made a quick bargain to run as a team. Campaign workers quickly spread through the Cincinnati Convention Center passing the word . . . When she was elected on the second ballot, her emotional acceptance speech recalling the struggles of women throughout the decades to reach this point included an appeal to elect two men to the remaining spots, leaving the other female candidate out of luck.³⁷

Briggs offers no explanation of what justification, if any, McKenzie gave for this extraordinary endorsement, or, indeed, if he ever questioned her about it. If his assertion is true, however – and no one within the AME Church with whom the researcher spoke has denied it is entirely feasible – questions remain about the seat of true power in the church and whether that power has shifted to include women after all. The accusation leveled by Briggs is that McKenzie was elected the first female bishop in the history of the AME Church only because she utilized the "old-boy" network that has shut women out of positions of power within the church for centuries, giving her support to male candidates in return for their endorsement of her candidacy. In conversations with both clergy and laypeople within the AME Church, the researcher has been told repeatedly that such alliances are commonplace and expected. Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry, the "other female candidate" whose candidacy was effectively ended by McKenzie's networking effort, explained that such coalitions are just as likely in church elections as

³⁷ David Briggs, "Female Bishop Elected with Old-Boy Network OK." www.beliefnet.com/story_3352_1.html. Accessed April 28, 2005.

in secular political contests. It was likely very necessary for McKenzie to do what she did in order to win. Had no alliance been formed, it is possible neither woman would have been elected in 2000. Tyler Guidry stated unequivocally that she harbors no rancor for either McKenzie or the election results. She expressed only gratification that at least one woman ascended to the episcopacy.

Like other major denominations, the AME Church body has engaged in discussion and debate on the topic of women in the ministry for decades. The traditional rationale for exclusion has been the interpretation of scriptural limitations on women's roles and behaviors in the church. While some denominations continue to reference the apostle Paul's admonitions to the women of Corinth, found in I Corinthians 14:33b-35,³⁸ others have abandoned that argument and have begun to admit women to all roles in the church. Richard Allen refused to grant Jarena Lee a license to preach in the early nineteenth century based on both church doctrine and cultural tradition; when the church Discipline was adopted, practice tradition became official policy. This policy remained unchanged until 1964, when language prohibiting the ordination of women was deleted from the *Discipline*. No language remains in subsequent editions of the *Discipline and Doctrine*, which expounds the church's polity and practice, that specifically denies women the right to be ordained. Nor is there any language that specifically addresses

³⁸ The scripture reference reads: "As in all congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." *Life Application Bible, New International Version*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. and Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 2085.

women's access to the episcopacy. What remains is a statement of the qualifications that would permit a person to declare candidacy for office.

Female clergy and laypersons of those churches that have abandoned restrictions against women in clergy, encouraged and inspired as they witness this transformation, might gain hope that further opportunities will exist for women on the basis of recent elections in the AME Church. The researcher has attempted to ascertain, based on the results of the research, whether this is a reasonable expectation.

In proportion to their percentage in the overall population, black women actually outnumber white women in the numbers of female preachers in America. Furthermore, black women have a more compelling historical basis for their efforts to achieve inclusion and participation in the religious practice of their cultural institutions. According to Lincoln and Mamiya, women played a major role in African religious traditions, and when Africans were introduced to Christianity during the American enslavement experience, certain African retentions were incorporated into the new Christian belief system. In mainland United States, as well as other parts of the "New World" such as the Caribbean and Afro-Latin regions, women continued to occupy a major role in African religious practices. Thus, examples of female prominence persist in Voodoo³⁹ of Haiti, Santeria in Cuba, Shango in Grenada and Trinidad, Obeah in Jamaica, and Candomble and Umbanda in Brazil.⁴⁰

³⁹ Spelling of this term varies among the sources used. Voodoo, voodoo, and vodun are all used by the various authors to refer to the same practices. Spelling as used by the sources has not been altered.

⁴⁰ Lincoln, 276.

In the United States, the strongest African influence on women's role in religion continues to be found in the Voudou of New Orleans. In 1830s New Orleans, so-called "Voodoo Queen" Marie Laveaux is said to have wielded considerable power over the city's political institutions. Prevented from holding public office by virtue of her gender and color, Laveaux nonetheless was acknowledged as one of the most powerful and influential persons of either sex in New Orleans throughout her career. Even today, Madame Laveaux is celebrated with a major role in the annual New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration and her tomb is maintained as an historical site. Elsewhere in the United States, as African-Americans adapted to the European interpretation of Christianity, black men assumed many of the patriarchal underpinnings evident in a slaveholding society in which women, like blacks, were suppressed and relegated to subservient roles. Consequently, there are many reasons for the struggle faced by women in the United States to achieve full inclusion in religious practice and leadership.

In the African Methodist Episcopal Church, an aspiring preacher must be accepted by his or her local congregation and given a license to preach by the presiding bishop before he or she is recognized by the AME body. The process begins with the request for a license to preach, which is addressed to the local church where the person holds membership. This request must be approved by a Church Conference, a special meeting of the church membership called for that purpose. Upon receiving the church's recommendation, the candidate is presented to the Quarterly Conference. Once the Quarterly Conference has approved the candidate, a license to preach is granted and the candidate sent on to the District Conference Committee on Ministerial Orders. This body

examines the candidate and, if he or she meets all qualifications, presents the person to the District Conference and subsequently to the Annual Conference.⁴¹

Although she was refused a license to preach when she petitioned Richard Allen in 1809, Jarena Lee nevertheless began, in 1820, to travel and preach extensively throughout the New York-New Jersey region with a group of AME ministers. Two years later, despite increased restrictions on Black movement and liberty in the wake of the Denmark Vesey rebellion, another AME preaching woman, Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, traveled and preached throughout Maryland. Other women during this era, determined to answer what they recognized as a divine calling, disregarded the prohibitions both black and white men sought to impose upon them. Among these were Harriet Felson Taylor of the Washington, D.C. area and Rachel Evans, who served in the New Jersey Annual Conference of the AME Church.

Women agitated for full inclusion and power-sharing in the AME Church for more than 200 years, but tradition and habit combined to deny them access until the end of the twentieth century. Even after the first ordination of women as itinerant elders in the AME Church in 1948, more than four decades elapsed before a woman was appointed presiding elder, and almost another decade passed before the election of the first female bishop.

Women broke through the barriers and were assigned the responsibility for church pastorates, but they found that they were ordinarily assigned to smaller churches, to what McKenzie calls "challenging" churches, or as assistant pastors. McKenzie asserts that

⁴¹ *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church 2004-2006*. (Nashville, TN: The African Methodist Episcopal Church AMEC Sunday School Union, 2005), 87-88.

women were barely tolerated, offered very little support or assistance, and found few opportunities for being mentored. Despite the fact that there are thousands of female pastors in all denominations today, many find that the support they need is often unavailable. McKenzie believes that women have been prevented from moving beyond the local church in significant numbers. In the larger society, a few African-Americans deemed exemplary by the dominant culture are allowed to move into positions of power and authority in some fields; in much the same way, a few women have been elevated in the church. McKenzie sees the effort to get past the perceived tokenism of the first or only woman as a serious challenge. She writes in *Not Without A Struggle* that, when in the private sector the decision was made to hire "a woman," women felt some resentment at having to compete against each other for the one slot allotted them.⁴² In much the same way, perhaps, clergywomen were skeptical of the move to elect "a" woman as bishop in 2000 because of its implicit limitations on unrestricted opportunity for all women.

The fact that African Methodist Episcopal women have been ordained for more than fifty years has not meant that all opposition to ordination of women has dissipated. There is still some disagreement within the church as to whether women should serve as pastors, presiding elders, or as bishops. According to one associate minister in an Atlanta-area African Methodist Episcopal church, she remained an associate minister for many years because the first churches to which she would have been assigned refused to accept her. As head of the "pastoral care" ministry at her church, this minister received accolades for her effective ministry in a church with a membership approaching 6,000. Yet she was refused acceptance by several smaller churches before being assigned to the

⁴² McKenzie, 67.

church where she is pastor today. This attitude is not uncommon even within churches where women are routinely ordained today.⁴³ The significance of the anti-female viewpoint, then, continues to have an impact on the future of the AME Church.

Conceptual Framework

Several theory systems impact the conceptual framework for this study. The initial focus is Molefi Asante's theory of Afrocentricity and bell hooks' black feminism combined with the concept of womanism as first articulated by novelist Alice Walker and later refined by Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant and other womanist religious scholars. In addition, aspects of the theory of social change were utilized in the findings and conclusions sections of the dissertation.

One rationale for the expanded participation of women in the Black church is based upon the Afrocentric ideal. Molefi Asante wrote in *Afrocentricity* that "an African renaissance is only possible if there is an African ideology, distinct from a Eurocentric ideology, which allows African agency, that is, a sense of self-actualizing based upon the best interests of African people."⁴⁴ The application of Asante's theory suggests that fuller participation by women in Black church affairs would follow the African tradition. If this tradition placed women with men at the center, it would make sense to revamp the Black church to reflect this reality. Male spiritual leaders who based their polity and practice on the best interests of their people would welcome the participation and

⁴³ Churches have the option of declining an appointment, and some have been known to exercise that option for a variety of reasons, including the refusal to accept a woman pastor.

⁴⁴ Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Chicago: African-American Images, 2003), 2.

contributions of women, who have traditionally been known as nurturers and providers of the needs of their people.

The argument that the church was one of a very few domains in which African-American men could wield significant power and authority, and that Black women should accede to that need and cease to agitate for a share of the power, would prove to be spurious in this theoretical framework. Further, the Black church would rightly reject a religious model based on a Eurocentric model – rooted in patriarchal philosophy and therefore alien to the traditional African model of religious practice in which women played a vital and central role. Such a model, according to the Afrocentric viewpoint, is and will continue to be a source of contention and disparity in the African-American church. Although Asante's theory of Afrocentrism can be seen as a feasible application in this regard, some womanist writers take extreme exception to the entire tenor of his work. Cheryl J. Sanders, for example, cites the work of several prominent womanist scholars in *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology*. Delores S. Williams believes that "Afrocentrism, as developed by Asante, is 'woman exclusive' despite its pretense that it is 'inclusive of all black people.'"⁴⁵ Other contributors to *Living in the Intersection* agree that Asante's work contains a decidedly sexist strand.

bell hooks has also advanced a theory rooted in an African consciousness in her theory of margin to center. Black women, according to hooks, have been relegated to the margins in the Black church experience, and only recently have gained access to the

⁴⁵Cheryl J. Sanders, ed. *Living the Intersection: Womanism and Afrocentrism in Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 13.

center.⁴⁶ African-American men have inadvertently linked themselves with the Eurocentric practice of relegating women – especially Black women – to the margin. In so doing, they are participating in the oppression of Black women perpetrated by white men and assisted and enabled by white women. Furthermore, if David Briggs' assertion of an "Old-Boy Network" operating to help Vashti McKenzie gain the episcopacy is true, then the progression of women back to the margin is fulfilled.⁴⁷ Like the theories of Afrocentricity and womanist theology, hooks' theory of margin to center positions women to regain a central role in the black religious tradition.

Essential questions that were investigated included an analysis of the commonalities in the lives and ministries of the three bishops that contributed to their election— the styles of leadership and administration utilized by each; the historical grounding or basis of their ministerial style and focus – i.e., to what extent can traditional Afrocentric elements be discerned in the particular style of ministry practiced in the churches and communities which these women serve? The research considered to what extent this tradition is present in the district and/or the annual conference out of which these women came. Whether there is an element of Afrocentric tradition in the preaching and/or community outreach programs undertaken in the churches pastored by these women was also a consideration of the research. Finally, the extent to which these women either practice or subscribe to womanist theological ideologies was considered.

⁴⁶See introduction to bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: from margin to center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

⁴⁷Ibid.

The theoretical tool utilized by African-American women in ministry in their assault on patriarchal privilege is a melding of womanist, black feminist and liberation theologies. Jualynne Dodson has written that women compelled the African Methodist Episcopal church to change and create a place for them in its structure.⁴⁸ Because of their sheer numbers and the pivotal role women play and have played in the founding, development and growth of the church, and the continuing vital role they play in its support, men had no choice but to accede to the demands made by women for a greater share of the power. The biblical womanist perspective holds that the experience of African-Americans and African-American women is the grounds for development of a reality that guides them. Furthermore, Vashti McKenzie writes that womanists must be convicted and affirm that Jesus' revolutionary message to black women is for freedom both as a woman and as an African-American woman. Women in ministry, then, ground their efforts in three perspectives: feminist, womanist and liberationist.⁴⁹

Feminist theology is adapted and reshaped because women are excluded from the universal theology fashioned by men, a perspective that represents only male experiences and ideas. Arising from the black woman's struggle with the threefold challenge of race, class and gender, a black feminism develops that is from a different experience.⁵⁰ The ultimate construction, womanism, is perceived as a catalyst for "revolutionary acts of

⁴⁸ Dodson, *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ McKenzie, *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

rebellion” aimed at the eradication of situations that oppress women.⁵¹ For black female religious scholars, one of the primary forms these acts of rebellion took was the development of womanist theology. Alice Walker’s definition of womanism is seen as “a critical, methodological framework” which could serve to challenge inherited traditions “for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy.”⁵²

Womanist theology is viewed as a form of liberation theology that can be utilized by African-American women scholars to release them from being masked in a theology developed by men. The various positions taken by scholars in this field, however, employ a diversity of approaches regarding the application of liberation theory to the black church. A prevalent assertion among black female theologian scholars is that African-American women are both marginalized and subordinated by men of both races and by the participation of white females in this oppressive system.

Methodology

The study utilizes the case study approach. Robert K. Yin defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” It seeks to answer such questions as “how” or “why” about a particular set of contemporary events.⁵³ In this case, the event under study is the election of three women as bishops in the African Methodist Episcopal Church after more than 200 years of both legal and paralegal denial by the church. Specifically, the study explains the

⁵¹ Stephanie Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.:Orbis Books, 2002), 57.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 12-14.

causal links that led to this historic event; describes the context in which this event occurred; explores the issues and outcomes of women's efforts to gain leadership in the church; and evaluates the likelihood of these elections to inspire and encourage a greater role for women in leadership of the AME Church.

Data Collection

The methodology reflects the overarching interest the scholarly community has in understanding the meaning and significance of these events in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and how they will impact other religious denominations. Care was taken to seek the perspective of the subjects, as well as other stakeholders in the church--both laypersons and clergy. The end product is narrative, descriptive, and responsive to the unique situations of the subjects. Care has also been taken to solicit the meaning of events and situations from the participants themselves, and to record the accounts they give of their lived experience and its impact upon their ultimate career path. Additionally, an effort was made to align the particular context of the participants' actions with the end results of those actions. Finally, care was taken to construct an understanding of the processes by which these events and actions occurred.

There are three units of analysis in this study, representing the three women subjects. This is a single-case study, focusing on multiple subjects. Some limitations on the conduct of the research existed due to the logistics of assignments within the worldwide African Methodist Episcopal Church. Two of the three subjects are assigned to distant locations that prevented personal individual interviews in their districts. Bishop Sarah Frances Davis is assigned to Southern Africa, and Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry serves the Bahamas, Cuba and London. In addition to the distant locations of the subjects,

each bishop has a busy travel schedule that made personal contact extremely difficult.

However, investigation and research were accomplished through contact at church conferences and meetings held within the continental United States, telephone interviews, written communications, written interviews, and collection of primary documents such as sermons, speeches and writings by the subjects. In addition, secondary sources such as biographical material and other materials were utilized.

Initial contact was made by email to each subject, followed by personal meetings wherever possible. Wherever personal meetings were not possible, telephone interviews were conducted and questionnaires were emailed to the subjects, which were completed and returned by email. The researcher obtained schedules of meetings and conferences for each Episcopal district, and attempted to meet with the bishops during these church conferences. Personal meetings for the purpose of interviews were arranged with both Bishop Sarah Frances Davis and Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry through the means listed above. Due to Bishop McKenzie's schedule, it was necessary to conduct the initial interview by telephone during her travels. In this instance, personal follow-up meetings were not possible due to the busy schedules of the subjects. Therefore, all follow-up questions were conducted through e-mail, telephone calls, faxes, and written communications. Primary sources utilized included sermons by the three subjects. Additional information was obtained from the office of the Church Historiographer and the Office of Information of the AME Church.

Interviews with secondary sources such as Reverend Dr. Dennis C. Dickerson, who is the Historiographer of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; retired General Officer Dr. Jamye Coleman Williams, who was the first woman elected a General Officer

of the AME Church and who played a pivotal role in the political process by introducing bills to the General Conference related to the election of a female bishop; and other ministers and persons within the leadership structure of the AME Church were also conducted where possible.

The Research Questions

1. What is the historical African Methodist Episcopal doctrine on women as preachers and leaders?
2. What has been the history of women's efforts to be ordained and to occupy leadership roles in the African Methodist Episcopal Church?
3. What are the personal styles and attributes that enabled these three women to achieve the level of bishop?

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter I presents a statement of the problem, rationale and significance of the study, the research questions, and the limitations of the study. Chapter I also presents the theoretical framework and methodology of the study.

Chapter II provides a review of the literature on the topic of women's leadership and the equity challenges women have faced within the black church.

Chapter III consists of an historical overview of continuity and change in the AME Church from 1816 until 2004, chronicling the development of women's place within the AME Church.

Chapter IV includes case studies of the three women bishops and a discussion and analysis of the findings of the study.

Chapter V consists of a summary of the conclusions of the study and recommendations for future studies.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

African Methodist Episcopal Church – The African Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in 1787 by Richard Allen in protest of racial discrimination by the Methodist Episcopal Church. The name “African” means that the church was organized by people of African descent and heritage. It is not to indicate that the church was founded in Africa, or that only African peoples may join. The church is a part of the family of Methodist churches, Richard Allen having believed that the structure of the Methodist church, with its orderly system of rules and regulations and “reliance upon the plain and simple gospel”, was best suited for newly emancipated African-American believers. The designation “Episcopal” denotes the form of governance, in which the chief officers of the church are the bishops. The Church is defined as “a community of people who believe in God and who have accepted Jesus Christ as the Guide and Master of their lives.”

AMEZ—The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, founded in 1820, began much like the other black Methodist denominations. Grew out of black members’ dissatisfaction with the refusal of the Methodist Episcopal Church to ordain black preachers and allow them to join the conference as itinerants. Restricted membership to Africans or their descendants in the beginning; later opened membership to whites and others. First of the black Methodist churches to extend both voting and ordination to women. The second largest of the black Methodist denominations.

Annual Conference – the meetings of a group of churches under the supervision of a presiding elder, who holds yearly conferences to receive reports and make assignments.

Bishop – a chief executive officer of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; elected by the General Conference; assigned to oversee an Episcopal District, which consists of several Annual Conferences. Responsibilities include appointment of ministers as head pastors of churches; appointment of presiding elders.

The Black Church – defined by C. Eric Lincoln as those totally black independent churches founded after the Free African Society of 1787. Other scholars include black congregations within white denominations where the church leadership and the majority of the membership are black; congregations where African-American congregants predominate; congregants and leaders of independent, historically black-controlled denominations and members and leaders in local congregations within white mainline denominations.⁵⁴

Call to preach – a person’s perception that he or she has received a spiritual call from

⁵⁴C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 1.

God through the Holy Spirit, directing them to enter the ministry.

Christology – theological interpretation of the person and work of Christ.

Church Conference – a meeting of the members of a local church in order to consider and transact official church business. The pastor of the church is the presiding officer.

Circuit – a circuit, or circuit church, is defined by the *Discipline and Doctrine* as "two or more churches under the supervision of a single pastor."⁵⁵

CME – The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Originally organized as the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America, the church was formally organized on December 15, 1870. Like the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the CMEs departed the white church due to dissatisfaction with the segregated and demeaning circumstances of their membership. The parting was amicable on both sides, however, although the white Methodist Episcopal Church, South imposed certain restrictions, one of which was a prohibition on any political activity whatsoever. The name was changed to Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in 1954, ostensibly to connote the idea that the church was open to all nationalities. The CME is the smallest of the three black Methodist denominations.

Connection – the organization and government of all AME churches. The hierarchy is as follows from top to bottom: The General Conference; the Bishops Council; the General Board; the General Departments; the Episcopal District; the Annual Conference; the District Conference; the local church.

Deacon – the first ordination of a candidate for ministry, having three years of preparation. The deacon may perform limited functions in the church.

Deaconess -- *The AME Discipline* defines a Deaconess as a widow or unmarried woman of good repute, set apart and consecrated by the bishop of the District after selection by the pastor and the Official Board. Her duties include support and encouragement of the general interests of the church, those of mission, and assistance to the needy and the lost, plus "the care of women"

District Conference – Composed of all traveling ministers, local preachers, evangelists, presidents of missionary societies, and one steward from each Quarterly Conference within a presiding elder district. Presidents of the lay organizations and a youth representative of each church are also members. The District Conference meets once a year in order to conduct the business of the district, including examination of candidates to the ministry.

⁵⁵*The Discipline and Doctrine of the African Methodist Episcopal Church 2000*. (Nashville: the AMEC Sunday School Union, 2001), 662.

Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church – the legal document by which the AME church is governed. It is revised by each General Conference and its provisions are binding upon all members of the AME Church.

Elder – the second and final ordination of the candidate for ministry. At this level, a person is a fully qualified minister in the AME Church.

Episcopacy – form of church government in which the chief executive officer is the bishop.

Episcopal District – composed of a number of Annual Conferences under the supervision of a bishop.

Evangelist – the official definition of an evangelist is a person who “engages in zealous preaching, teaching and spreading of the Gospel in order to lead the unsaved, the unchurched, and unconcerned to active participation in the church and its work.” Evangelism is for the purpose of “winning souls for Christ, helping them to grow spiritually, and enlisting them to win others”⁵⁶

Exhorter – A person who employs her/his talents as a teacher; the exhorter leads study groups and conducts prayer meetings. This person must be recommended by his/her class, examined by the Quarterly Conference, and receive a license to exhort.⁵⁷

General Board – the connectional administrative body of the AME Church; its primary duty is to supervise the financial program of all the agencies of the church receiving moneys from the General Budget. Its actions come under the jurisdiction of the general Conference, and in the years the General Conference does not meet under that of the Judicial Council. The members of the General Board are elected by the General Conference.⁵⁸

General Conference – the supreme legislative body of the AME Church. Meets quadrennially to create new laws or amend existing laws contained in the Discipline; to elect bishops, general officers and the general board; to define the powers, privileges and duties of the various entities of the church.

General Officer – a person elected by the General Conference to serve in an administrative position on the General Board.

⁵⁶*Discipline 2000*, 664.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

Hermeneutics – the study of the methodological principles of interpretation of the Bible.

Itinerant Elder – second level of pastoral assignment, in which a minister is assigned to head a church; attained after the candidate has completed a bachelor's degree.

License to Preach – granted to a person through the local church at the Quarterly conference. Eligible to become a deacon after two years' satisfactory standing.
 Pastor – the head of a church; as distinguished from a minister, who is not necessarily assigned to head a church.

Licentiate – a candidate for ministry. He or she has received a license to preach by the local church and the presiding elder of the district, and has delivered a first, or trials sermon to the congregation.

Love Feast – a service of preparation that takes place shortly before the sacrament of Holy Communion. Participants attest their feelings of goodwill toward one another and declare forgiveness in order to be found acceptable to take Communion on first Sunday.

Missionary – the general definition of a missionary is any member in good standing and of good moral and religious character, desiring to engage in urban or rural work, to teach, lecture, or exhort on educational, missionary, or religious subjects. although this definition provides for men to serve as missionaries, the position is usually filled by women. Missionaries are officially to be licensed by the church; members of the Women's Missionary Society of the local church are also referred to as missionaries, and may or may not fulfill all the official duties listed above.⁵⁹

Official Board – The Official Board is composed of all official leaders of the church, including presidents of all organizations, officers and members of all boards, stewardesses, deaconesses, and class leaders. The pastor is a member of the board and its ex-officio chairperson.

Ordination – the act of official investment with ministerial authority.

Parachurch – any activity or function that is not an official auxiliary of the church.

Presiding Elder – a “middle level” executive of the church, who is responsible for the oversight of a group of Annual Conferences. Appointed by the bishop.

Quarterly Conference – a meeting of the local church convened and chaired by the Presiding Elder of the District. The purpose of the Quarterly Conference is for the Presiding Elder to receive reports from all preachers, officers and auxiliary

⁵⁹*Discipline 2000*, 667.

heads of the local church.

Steward – Appointed by the pastor, these persons serve for a year's term at a time, and are responsible for the financial matters of the church including budgeting, negotiating the pastor's salary and benefits, and serving the needy. Stewards also have input in the planning for the local church, advising the presiding elder in planning for the church, and support of all church programs.

Stewardess – nominated by the pastor, a person of good and regular standing; duties include assistance to the stewards, providing the implements and elements of Holy communion and Baptism, and preparing the pulpit and altar for these rituals.

Trustee – Persons nominated by the pastor and elected by the church conference; their duties include handling of the temporal affairs of the church, i.e., maintaining the physical plant of the church and any other real estate holdings, and providing housing for the pastor.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Traditional churches of every denomination around the globe have excluded women from positions of authority and leadership for centuries. Faced with the sexism of a patriarchal church system, women have engaged in a battle to gain equality with men in the pulpit as well as in the highest levels of leadership in the church. The feminist movements of the 1960s sought to address the restrictions women face in the Christian church in all denominations. Significant gains have been made by mainline denominations such as the Episcopal, Methodist and Anglican churches, but these movements have focused primarily on white women and white women's perspectives. Literature about women in ministry that appeared before the late 1970s concerned the efforts of the white feminist theology movement in the United States. A review of the literature reveals that the black church and black churchwomen have not been addressed by feminist theology; however, the issue of women's place in the black church, which has gained prominence in recent years, cannot be separated from the struggles women have undertaken in all denominations to gain equal status with men.

Expectations were raised that black women's theological issues would be addressed when, during the era of the 1960s and 1970s, the theory of liberation theology gained prominence. Prominent black theologians such as James Cone and Gayraud

Wilmore explored the appropriateness of liberation theology to the situation of African-Americans in the Christian Church. A black theology was ultimately developed out of these explorations; however, black female theologians soon noted that even in black theology, something was still lacking in the application of new theological perspectives such as black and liberation theology to their peculiar situation. Black women found that they were as unable to cleave to black liberation theology as they were to feminist theology. Whereas feminist theology was not a good fit for the situations black women faced because white women's experiences were distinct from those of black women, the issues faced by black men were also too dissimilar to their own. Even worse, many black males did not fully comprehend the disparity between a theology that sought a "universal" liberation for black people and one that would address the singular experiences and needs of black women. As black women themselves engaged the issues of liberation theology, they began to articulate and clarify the issues faced by black females in the church as distinct from those faced by black males. As this new concept dealing with the unique experiences of black women developed, African-American female religious scholars readily adopted a new terminology to express the direction of black feminist theology. They took the term *womanist*, created by novelist Alice Walker in a 1979 essay¹, and adapted it to their particular situation. Thus the concept of womanist theology came into being. Struggling against the triple threat of racism, classism and sexism, black women have found it necessary to refute the feminist belief

¹ Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 100. Walker also used the term in 1983's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, which may be more familiar to most readers; however, her use of the term in the earlier work provides context and a more complete explication of the concept.

that theirs is a universal point of view which works well for all women, while at the same time working to bring black men to an understanding that the liberation of black men does not necessarily bestow liberation upon their sisters. Black women have taken definitive steps to correct the situations in the church that render them powerless, invisible, and unimportant.

From an early stage in black church history, women have stepped outside the bounds of the organized church when it refused to recognize their calling and allow them to preach or to assume leadership roles within the church. Shunning the implication that they require official recognition by men in the form of ordination, women have gone out to evangelize and preach, establish churches, and do the work that they believe they were called to do. Vashti McKenzie writes that women answering the call to preach desired to obey God rather than to obey men.² Black women in ministry believed God had a plan for their lives and ministry, and were willing to endure great hardship in order to follow that plan. They did not necessarily consider their actions a challenge to the men of the church. As Hermena Monroe, one of these pioneering preaching women expressed it, "We women will not fight men for their mess. God has plenty [of work] for us to do."³ Asked if she was ordained, Jarena Lee replied, "Not by the commission of men's hands; if the Lord has ordained me, I need nothing better."⁴ These early women preachers,

² Vashti McKenzie, *Not Without a Struggle: Leadership Development for African-American Women in Ministry* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996), 31.

³ Deborah A. Austin, "In the Middle of Everyday Life: The Spaces Black Clergywomen Create," in *Perspectives on Womanist Theology* Jacquelyn Grant, ed. (Atlanta: ITC Press, 1995), 228.

⁴ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, eds. *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 279.

including the "Daughters of the Conference" of the AME Church such as Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, and their contemporaries, "had to be forthright, courageous, and assertive in order to respond to God's call" in the face of unremitting male resistance.⁵

Hermena Monroe was so determined to follow her call to preach that she preached to the winos on a street corner:

I could not wait for someone to die or move or retire so that I could pastor. I went out on the street corner, where I knew alcoholics gathered. I preached to these forgotten men and women. Each Saturday, more and more men and women came. When it became too cold to preach outside, I rented a building and started Sunday morning worship service.⁶

Undaunted when she ran out of funds, Monroe moved her service to the chapel of the local funeral home. On one Easter Sunday morning there was a body occupying the chapel, so service was held in a vacant field across the street. On this Easter morning, Monroe said, her goal was to take the word of God into the midst of the everyday life of the people.

Monroe was only one of many women who refused to allow obstacles to prevent her answering the call. Amanda Berry Smith, denied ordination in the AME Church, left to join the Holiness movement and became known as a great preacher.⁷ Rebecca Cox Jackson, opposed by her husband and family as well as the AME clergy, eventually found it necessary to forsake both family and church to join the Shakers, who recognized her as an authentic prophet. Accused of causing dissension in the churches because she would

⁵ McKenzie, 43.

⁶ Austin, 4.

⁷ Lincoln and Mamiya, Ibid.

not take formal membership in one, Jackson endured threats and attempts on her life during her career, but went on to establish a predominantly black Shaker sisterhood in Philadelphia. Jualynne Dodson writes that in spite of these trials, African Methodist churchwomen accumulated and used power in the church and created changes that gave women a place in AME leadership. In doing so, they created “a pivotal institution in the larger African-American community.”⁸ McKenzie says that these “Daughters of the Conference” were “instrumental in articulating women’s gifts, the call to leadership, and ordination within the African Methodist Episcopal Church.”⁹ These struggles illustrate the persistent challenges women have faced in their efforts to carve out a niche for themselves in the church.

Because black women have been excluded from concerns articulated in feminist theology, they have formulated a unique womanist theology that directly addresses their concerns and their particular struggle. The voices of women of any color have not been heard in hermeneutics, and this must change if theology is to truly address the issues women face. Just as whites – both male and female – long reserved the words “man” and “woman” to themselves at the expense of black men and black women, in much the same way they have overlooked the unique sensibilities of the black clergy even when the effort has ostensibly been made to address them. Jacquelyn Grant writes that this situation results in what she calls “reconciliation without liberation.” Additionally, black men have failed to adequately support black women in their struggle for inclusion in the

⁸ Jualynne Dodson, *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 5.

⁹ McKenzie, *Ibid.*

black church. In adopting liberation theology, black men failed to consider that black women need to be liberated from sexism in the church. Some of the chauvinism women face is institutional and unintentional, but much of it is deliberate. Both types must be addressed and eradicated. Oftentimes, women have been systematically and purposely excluded from leadership in the black church, and men who claim liberation theology is appropriate for the black church must join in the effort to liberate women, or they are being hypocritical. If traditional religious practices of Christianity are inherently sexist, and have been used and distorted to support both racism and sexism, then those constructions must be dismantled and a new structure established. Ella Pearson Mitchell is among those woman religious scholars who warn that to do less is to risk the future of the entire church. Mitchell writes that black male churchmen may be contradicting God's plan when they seek to hinder women in the church. Furthermore, she goes on to say, men's restrictions on women are simply a cultural bias that God will ultimately break through.¹⁰ The development of feminist and womanist theology as part of women's struggle in the church has, since its inception, become a significant entity with its own contexts and concerns. In order for women to be successful in their efforts, however, men must join in the struggle.

Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and Katie Cannon are among the female religious scholars who have structured a new vision of theology based on the theories of womanism and black feminism. Other scholars such as Vashti McKenzie and Kelly Brown Douglas have also made significant contributions to discussion in this area. In

¹⁰ Ella Pearson Mitchell, *Women: To Preach or Not To Preach: Twenty-One Outstanding Black Preachers Say Yes!* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1991), 14; 41.

some cases, their theories question the scriptures themselves, viewing them as distorted and prejudicial patriarchal documents. Grant questioned the application of liberation theory to black women in the church, and concluded, further, that perhaps the death of Jesus and the blood of the cross warranted a different interpretation in light of women's experiences in the church and society. Women have, in many instances, adopted the persona of Christ as a suffering servant. Instead, suggests Grant, Christ's life might be better seen as an illustration of women's mission in life, not as a symbol and an exemplar of suffering. Grant wrote that reinterpreting Christ from the point of view of the mission He was given by God while on earth would better serve the situation and the mission of Christian women.¹¹

The movement among some feminist writers and theologians to reinterpret the Bible itself to make it more gender-neutral has also resonated within the black church. Modern and traditional interpretations of scripture have been castigated as patriarchal and chauvinistic. McKenzie discusses the scholars who question the applicability of traditional Scripture to women today. The question is whether these concerns and considerations will continue to develop and what impact they will have on future developments in the church.

As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, Anna Julia Cooper, considered by writer Rufus Burrow to be the forerunner of the modern womanist movement, articulated the seminal concerns of African-American women. Cooper argued that black women must tell their own stories – that white women, black men or

¹¹ Ibid.

white men could not do it for them. Furthermore, she stated, in order to tell their own stories, black women's voices had to be freed.¹² Burrow, discussing Cooper's late nineteenth century writings, thinks it is appropriate to say that the main characteristics of womanist thought were exhibited by many of the women writers of this period, making them "at least forerunners" of the tradition. Although he hesitates to name such women as Cooper "womanists" because the term was not yet in use, he states that they clearly expressed many of the same ideas held by modern womanist scholars.¹³ Cooper also expressed the opinion that white women were guilty of classism as well as racial insensitivity. According to Burrow, she may have been the first writer to suggest that black women faced the double oppressions of racism and sexism. This theme has been repeated in recent scholarship with increasing frequency. Black feminist thought grew out of the black woman's struggle with racism, sexism and classism; womanist theology developed in response to the challenges faced by black churchwomen.

Black women have faced persistent challenges as they sought fuller participation in all denominations. As with all other black church structures, the men who participated in the formal organizing of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 did not formally allocate women a space—not in ministry, nor laity, nor conference. Although credited with the successful founding, development and support of the church, women were expected to be content to operate in a supportive role rather than in any position of leadership or authority. Ironically, while women were lauded as the "backbone" of the

¹² Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xiii.

¹³ Rufus Burrow, "Enter Womanist Theology and Ethics," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 22 Issue 1, (Spring 1998), 19.

church, they found that there was no place for them at its head. From the inception of the church, however, they have devised various imaginative means of wresting a modicum of control over church affairs. Sources of power women have created for themselves in the AME Church include their areas of strength – membership, organization, and resources. In the area of resources, they have shown an ability to influence many aspects of church life up to and including the assignment of pastors. In one case, the women were unsuccessful in influencing the choice made by the bishop for a pastoral assignment. It was only when they withheld financial support that they were able to prevail. From that point, the local pastor as well as the bishop consulted with the women when making appointments of ministers.¹⁴

In some denominations, women were able to gain limited leadership roles in such organizations as the Missionary Society and lay organizations, but repeated requests for a more inclusive role, including the right to preach, were routinely denied. Even as the church slowly created positions within the church to accommodate women's desire to serve, their participation was strictly limited. For example, C. Eric Lincoln writes that the 1868 General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church created the post of stewardess solely to assist male stewards, class leaders, pastors, and to "look after other women."¹⁵ Women still were barred from participation as pastors, presiding elders and bishops. They were not, under any circumstance, to be placed in positions of leadership over men. After much effort and agitation, women were finally licensed to

¹⁴ Dodson, 86.

¹⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya, Ibid.

preach by the 1884 General Conference of the AME Church, but they were still not ordained.

Most writing about the issue of women and the church has been centered in such themes as liberation theology, black theology, and feminist theology. As the twentieth century progressed, and the issues of feminist and liberation theology became more prominent, what became known as the womanist theology movement took shape. Since the early 1980s, black female theologians and religious scholars have explored the applicability of both liberation and feminist theology to black women's situation and found it lacking.¹⁶

In a 1979 essay titled "Coming Apart," Alice Walker coined the term "womanist" in addressing a female character's "awakening" to the unique position of black women in American society: "a 'womanist' is a feminist, only more common." She went on to further clarify the term in an extended footnote:

"Womanist" encompasses "feminist" as it is defined in Webster's, but also means instinctively *pro*-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in Black women's culture. It comes (to me) from the word "womanish", a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: "You're acting *womanish*!" . . . that is to say, like our mothers themselves, and like other women we admired . . . I needn't preface it with the word "Black" . . . , since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface "feminist" with the word "white" . . .¹⁷

¹⁶ Jacquelyn Grant, Katie Cannon, and Jualynne Dodson are among the first generation of black female religious scholars to gain prominence in the field. Their adoption and use of the term "womanist" in the early 1980s soon popularized the term.

¹⁷ Walker, *Ibid.*

When she wrote *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, published in 1983, Walker later expanded her earlier definition of the term to include the following:

Womanist, from womanish (Opp. of "girlish", i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the Black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interest in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. Serious.¹⁸

Since the term *womanist* first came into use by black female religious scholars in the mid-1980s, it has taken on new and expanded meanings. Adopted by these scholars as more reflective of their identities than the term "feminist", the term was first used by Katie Cannon to redefine black feminist theology.¹⁹ As appropriated by womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant, the term defines a womanist as one who is:

... a strong Black woman who has sometimes been mislabeled as domineering castrating matriarch ... one who has developed survival strategies in spite of the oppression of her race and sex in order to save her family and her people. Walker's womanist notation suggests not "the feminist", but the active struggle of Black women that makes them who they are ... womanist means being and acting out who you are and interpreting the reality for yourself. In other words, Black women speak for themselves.²⁰

Grant goes on to explain that:

Womanist theology begins with the experiences of Black

¹⁸ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich Publisher, 1983), xi.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jacquelyn Grant, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, with Special Reference to Christology," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* VIII (Spring 1986), Number 2, 200.

women as its point of departure. This experience includes not only Black women's activities in the larger society but also in the churches, and reveals that Black women have often rejected the oppressive structure in the church as well. These experiences provide a context for doing theology. Those experiences had been and continue to be defined by racism, sexism and classism and therefore offer a unique opportunity and a new challenge for developing a relevant perspective in the theological enterprise. This perspective in theology that I am calling womanist theology draws upon the life and experiences of some Black women who have created meaningful interpretations of the Christian faith.²¹

Womanist theologians developed a body of literature that questioned the status they held within the black church. The primary intent of womanist theologians and ethicists was to affirm the humanity and dignity of black women in particular, and of all African-American people in general. They sought, in fact, to affirm all humankind without distinction of race, class or gender; to affirm the struggles and victories of black women; and to affirm and celebrate differences as well.²² Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, for example, focuses on the black woman's agency, centrality, importance and indispensability to the church and to the community.²³ This perspective marks a clear distinction between womanist and feminist thought, as the latter is perceived as focusing on the status and advancement primarily of white females in opposition to white males.

An important question is whether womanist theologians can continue to support black liberation theology because the latter does not address all the issues of Black female inequality. Some womanist writers go so far as to suggest revamping Christology

²¹ Ibid., 201.

²² Burrow, 19.

²³ Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, *If It Wasn't For the Women...Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 4.

completely in order to redress some of the problems that are perceived to exist in traditional theology.²⁴ Grant writes that an essential problem with Christology in the European tradition is the appropriation of Christ as personifying a white male. In 1986, she wrote that Christ might be seen as manifesting himself as the Black American Woman, the Suffering Servant. In 1995's "Womanist Theology" Grant posits Christ as representing "a three-fold significance: first, he identifies with the 'little people', Blackwoman, where they are; secondly, he affirms the humanity of these, 'the least'; and thirdly, he inspires hope in the struggle for resurrected, liberated existence."²⁵ Seen thus, Christ cannot continue to represent the embodiment of the racist, oppressive and exploitative history of the world's oppressor in the guise of the white male persona the world currently recognizes. It is therefore necessary for this image to be eliminated from the consciousness of the black experience, and a new black image inserted. Grant argues that replacement of this image is essential to eradicate the beliefs, prejudices and attitudes in the minds and psyches of both blacks and whites if we are to end the myth of inferiority under which black people labor. She sees black women as twice removed from the image of a white, male God, making the transition doubly important for African-American women. Jesus must no longer be used to undergird patriarchy, white supremacy, and privilege.²⁶

²⁴ See Grant's writings of 1979, 1986, and 1995, in which she discusses new theological concepts of Christology.

²⁵ Grant, 1986, 200.

²⁶ Grant, 1995, 135-136; 138.

The larger question eventually facing most womanist scholars was whether black women could apply the theories and tenets of either (white) feminist theology or black (male) liberation theology to their particular situations.²⁷ Kelly Brown Douglas believed that the historical roots of this problem facing womanist theology lie in acceptance of the "ideological foundations of the patriarchal world order." By this she means that accepting Christianity's acknowledgement of Israel as the elect demands that one also accepts the Judeo-Christian world order. Unfortunately, and to the detriment of every other group of people within society, by logical extension, power in such a worldview is held in male hands.²⁸

Delores Williams' approach to womanist theology did not allow for the standard liberation theology interpretation. Williams wrote that there was a definite "non-liberative strand" in God, especially as God relates to non-Jews. Williams points out that God does not always liberate, and suggested that perhaps the intent was not liberation, but for the believer to develop a greater strength through survival of oppression.²⁹

The problem of reconciling the patriarchal underpinnings of Christianity to the need for women to be liberated was of concern to many womanist writers. Catherine Wessinger advanced the question of women's loyalty to an obviously flawed church. She believes, however, that women's perspective on Christianity can resolve this conflict.

²⁷ Dodson, 2002; Grant, 1982; Burrow, 1998.

²⁸ Kelly Brown Douglas, "A Womanist Looks at the Future Direction of Theological Discourse," *Anglican Review* Vol. 76 Issue 2 (Spring 1994), 225; see also Kelly Brown Douglas, "When the Subjugated Come to the Center," *Journal of Religious Thought* Vol. 52/53 (Winter 1995/Spring 1996), 37.

²⁹ Delores S. Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or, Speaking the Black Woman's Tongue," *Journal of Religious Thought* Vol. 43 Issue 1 (Spring/Summer 1986), 42.

Wessinger contends that if women feel loyalty to a patriarchal religious system that is oppressive to them and does not offer the expectation of equality, women will add that expectation to it.³⁰ Womanist scholars have come to much the same conclusion-- that black women have as their primary goal making the church live up to its possibilities; they seek to support, not to harm, their church, and it is to this end that they bend their talents and their efforts.³¹

The theory of womanism appears to have rapidly supplanted other considerations in the question of black women's place in the church. At the same time, however, feminist, black and liberation theologies have had a significant impact on the development of womanist theology. Stephanie Mitchem views the assertion of a womanist theology as a conscious act of rebellion against the oppressive situations that limited black women's participation in the church.³² Women had now rejected the established way of "doing" religion and had developed their own "way of thinking, talking, writing about and doing theology and ethics, based on their own experiences and history."³³ Such a position also definitively places black women outside the parameters of white feminist theology.

Womanist scholars concluded that white feminists were unable to shed their ingrained racism, thereby exposing their insensitivity to the racism black women face;

³⁰ Catherine Wessinger, *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 7.

³¹ See in particular Jualynne Dodson's *Engendering Church* for more on this point of view.

³² Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 57.

³³ Burrow, *Ibid.*

and both whites and blacks were guilty of classism.³⁴ Primary among the differences between black womanists and white feminists was the fact that black women did not seek first to separate themselves from black men. The womanist struggled to free herself, but her ultimate goal was much more-- the emancipation and uplift of black men, women and children as well as people of any color who suffered from oppression. Though they often saw themselves as feminists, they also saw the need to fight for wider-ranging rights for all people. Paula Giddings writes that "their convictions concerning the rights of women were deeply rooted in experience as well as theory."³⁵ Black women refused to surrender to the barriers erected to contain them, but actively engaged in struggle on political, social and religious fronts to eliminate those obstacles; in the process, their efforts served to improve the lives of all African-Americans, not just women. This difference alone seriously militated against an essential congruity between white and black women's movements both within and without the church.

A number of contradictions and errors of fact appear in womanist literature, as well as indications that some conclusions are based on apparently faulty interpretation. Some womanist theologians narrowly interpret biblical sources, which suggests the use of faulty logic in drawing some of their conclusions. For example, the contention that the Bible and perhaps even Christian theology are suspect because of their patriarchal tendencies is a commonly-held opinion. While it is undisputable that many denominations exclude women on the basis of scriptural interpretation, the extraordinary

³⁴ Several scholars have addressed this topic, particularly Delores Williams in 1985, McKenzie in 1996, and Burrows in 1998.

³⁵ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill, William Morrow, 1984), 55.

conclusion by some writers that the Bible's use as the basis of theology should consequently be reconsidered because of its distortions and historical misuse appears to this writer a radical response. Historically, some have argued that Christianity itself is "the white man's religion" and of no use for African-Americans. It would seem that the same extension of logic is being applied to the patriarchal biases of the Bible. Many womanist writers agree that the root of the problem is in biblical hermeneutics. Theologian Jacquelyn Grant, rather than casting aspersions upon the Bible itself, presents a new hermeneutics, acknowledging that the problem may not be in the content of the scripture, but rather in the interpretations and the ways in which scripture has been used. Douglas expresses the dilemma succinctly when she cautions, "the god of our theologies is not the god of our lives."³⁶ The implication here is that humans have placed interpretations on scripture that are perhaps not accurate or based on the truth of the Scriptures.

While it is probably necessary for believers to reconcile the many contradictions and inconsistencies in biblical interpretation and religious practice in the church, Carpenter and Mitchell are correct in warning against the danger of contradicting God's plan because of humankind's misuse of scripture. The fact that men have oriented church practices to place themselves at the head does not mean that their implementation is what God intended. As Mitchell so accurately states, the gift comes from God, but the tradition comes from man. Perhaps man has established a cultural bias that God will

³⁶ Douglas, 37.

break through.³⁷ Similarly, Douglas avers that although many scholars question the concepts of liberation theology in view of the fact that black people and others of color around the world continue to suffer oppression-- often at the hands of the church or with the cooperation of the leaders of the church-- humans may lack the capacity to understand God's workings. Indeed, the subjugated should see God as both liberator and sustainer in the midst of oppression, and continue to struggle to find life and wholeness in the biblical witness to God.³⁸ Demetrius Williams suggests that the basic problem is humans' incapacity to understand God.³⁹

It is unclear to what extent much of the research is subjective to the detriment of its conclusions. There is a definite divergence between women writers as well as between those male writers who have addressed the topic. A majority of female theologians appear to agree on major points and themes. Whereas male writers see no problem with linking male and female efforts under the banner of liberation theology, most female writers disagree that liberation theology can be applied "wholesale" to women's situation. Some authors critique liberation theology as any portion of the solution to women's plight in the church. If, as Delores Williams states, God does not liberate all the oppressed in every situation,⁴⁰ liberation theology is not the answer to the plight of women in the church. Rather than wholesale liberation, Williams suggests, God provides opportunities for sufferers to overcome oppression and achieve a better quality

³⁷ Mitchell, 1991, 14; 41.

³⁸ Douglas, Ibid.

³⁹ Demetrius Williams, *An End To This Strife: The Politics of Gender in African-American Churches* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2004).

⁴⁰ Delores Williams, Ibid.

of life. A further consideration is the failure of black liberation theology to address sexism in the church. Some womanist writers identify the basis of the problem as male chauvinism. Society is chauvinistic and patriarchal, and men have made no effort to change. Among womanists, some say that black male theologians have adopted the chauvinist biases of "white" religious systems. Some men see women's efforts as detrimental to their own struggle for power and/or respect. As stated above, this perspective runs counter to the world view of most womanist scholars, but harmonizes quite adequately with the general perspective of feminist theology, which focuses primarily on women in opposition to men.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

For more than 200 years, women of the African Methodist Episcopal Church have struggled to break through the barriers that have limited their full participation in the church. Over time, they have gained more power and recognition in all areas of church work. In the black church in general, women have made significant progress from the time when they were totally excluded from any official role whatsoever in preaching, pastoring or leading the church to the right they hold today to serve as preachers, pastors, elders and bishops in the church of the twenty-first century. This legacy is very much the case in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The election of three women bishops at the AME General Conferences of 2000 and 2004 represents a milestone in the long fight women have waged for equity in the church. Few believe, however, that the struggle is over, or that African Methodist women have accomplished full equality in the church despite the presence of women in the ministry or three women in the episcopacy.

The women of the black church have a long history of service to the church, and they are credited with playing an instrumental role in organizing and nurturing the early church; to them goes much of the credit for the growth of the black church. In the case of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the role women played from the beginning

of the denomination in increasing its numbers, in supporting it financially, and in ensuring the success of its programs has been well-documented. The present status of the church is attributed in large part to women's efforts. Their role in helping to found the church, however, did not translate to an equal status in leadership. Women have struggled to gain a more active role in AME leadership for many years and have used many means to gain access to church hierarchy.

One of the points of contention for modern activists who continue to fight for women's equality in the black church is the contradiction between the church's stance against racial discrimination and oppression and the way these injustices are perpetrated in the black church by the restrictions it places on women's participation. The African Methodist Episcopal Church did not begin out of differences related to scripture or doctrine, but as a protest against discriminatory treatment of African worshippers in the Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. According to an official history of the AME Church:

Most religious groups had their origin in some theological, doctrinal, or ideological dispute or concern. But the AME Church originated as a protest against the inhuman treatment which the . . . people of African descent were forced to accept from the white people belonging to the St. George Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This fact says to us that the organization of the AME Church was the result of racial discrimination rather than of any theological or doctrinal concern.¹

Richard Allen was a twenty-six year old traveling preacher who had been born into slavery but purchased his freedom as a young man. After his conversion to

¹ Andrew White, *Know Your Church Manual: The African Methodist Episcopal Church* (n.c.: AMEC Publishing House, 1965), 6.

Christianity, Allen became a popular preacher, traveling throughout the region and sometimes giving as many as four or five sermons in a day. In the late 1780s, he joined St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At the same time, he also held prayer meetings for the Africans of the community and strove to build a separate house of worship for his people. The events of this Sunday morning in 1787 would be the impetus for that eventuality to happen. The black worshippers of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church learned in a shocking manner that their status in the church had undergone a subtle yet dramatic change. They were no longer welcome in the main sanctuary, but were expected to worship in a new, segregated section that had been established for them in the gallery. Allen writes:

A number of us usually sat on seats placed around the wall, and on Sabbath morning we went to church, and the sexton stood at the door and told us to go in the gallery. He told us to go and we would see where to sit. We expected to take the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better.²

The service was already underway when the Africans came in, and just as they reached their seats, the elder called for prayer at the altar. When Allen and the others knelt to pray, however, they were forcibly pulled from their knees and told to get up. "You must not kneel here," they were told by the elder. When the Africans replied, "Wait until prayer is over," they were told that if they did not remove themselves the church elders would force them away.³ At the conclusion of the prayer, Richard Allen and the rest of

² Daniel A. Payne. *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (n.c.: The Publishing House, AMEC Sunday School Union, 1891; reprint Nashville: AMEC Sunday School Union/Legacy Printing, 1998), 79.

³ Ibid.

this group rose and departed, vowing never to return to St. George's. "We all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church."⁴ They then set about to establish a place of worship for themselves apart from the white congregation.

Allen and his followers intended to remain Methodists and continue their affiliation with the Methodist Church, but events following their exodus from St. George's led to the eventual establishment of a separate denomination. Not only were the African-American members eventually stripped of their membership in the Methodist Church, but leading up to that final indignity, they also endured repeated legal action to deny their autonomy. The elders of the Methodist Church denied assignment of pastors to their church; they then attempted to transfer ownership of the Africans' church building to the Methodist body. On more than one occasion, a white preacher was sent to the new church to take over the pulpit. Through various means, the Africans resisted these attempts at intimidation and control, and continued to meet as a separate body for worship. Their patience was growing short, however; they began to consider ways to sever all ties with the Methodist Episcopal Church in order to have control over their own affairs.

In April 1787, Allen had organized the Free African Society as a mutual aid society, dedicated to serving the needs of its members. A benevolent society, the

⁴ Ibid.

organization was not initially a religious body.⁵ Once Allen and his followers removed themselves from fellowship with St. George's, however, the Free African Society took on religious as well as its previous secular functions. It is not entirely clear whether the Society predated the exodus from St. George's; however, c. Eric Lincoln places the organization of the Society in April 1787, and the separation from St. George's as November of that year, seven months after the Society began. At any rate, the newly independent group of Africans resumed their religious activities under the auspices of the Free African Society.

The first religious services held by the Free African Society took place in a rented storeroom. Later, between 1788 and 1791, the Society used the Friends Free African School House as its meeting place, holding regular worship services there beginning in 1790.⁶ Even before the separation from St. George's, Allen had attempted to establish a separate church for Africans where they could worship freely and in peace, while maintaining their Methodist membership. When they tried to do this after leaving St. George's, they faced many challenges from the white Methodists. The elders of the church began a series of actions that the black members saw as increasingly hostile, making the need to become independent even more desirable. The pivotal act was the refusal of the Methodist church to supply a preacher to the black church; the Africans determined to take the final steps to establish an autonomous house of worship. Soon after this, however, a majority of the members of the society decided that they wanted to

⁵ Lincoln, 51.

⁶ Ibid.

affiliate with the Church of England rather than with the Methodists. Richard Allen was offered the position of pastor to lead the new congregation. Allen declined, stating that he considered the clear organization of the Methodist system the best choice for the recently enslaved African people.⁷ In July 1794, St. Thomas' African Episcopal Church was dedicated in the original building constructed by the Free African Society. Absalom Jones, who was ordained the first black Protestant Episcopal priest, subsequently became the pastor of St. Thomas' Church. Allen then moved to establish a completely independent house of worship following the Methodist doctrine.

The new African Methodist congregation was established in an old blacksmith shop on land owned by Allen. He called upon Bishop Francis Asbury of the Methodist Church to dedicate the building as Bethel Church of Philadelphia. In the ensuing months, other congregations in the area of Maryland, Philadelphia, Delaware and New Jersey were inspired to follow Allen's example, and black Methodist churches developed throughout the region. Over the next few years, the white Methodists subjected these churches, as well, to a series of conflicts and confrontations centered primarily on control of church property and ministerial assignments. Frustrated at the continuing conflicts, and determined to develop a strategy for dealing with the problems, the African-Americans decided a meeting of all concerned congregations was needed in order to determine a course of action. Delegates from five churches met in 1816 at Bethel Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and officially organized a new denomination – the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Richard Allen, who had been

⁷ Ibid.

ordained a deacon by Francis Asbury in 1791, was elevated to elder in 1816 in Philadelphia. After Daniel Coker declined the position of bishop to which he had been elected, the body elected Richard Allen as the first bishop of the new denomination. Thus was convened the first General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

As an independent mutual aid society, The Free African Society –forerunner of the AME Church – had granted equal status to all members, male and female. Women were full voting members on issues related to dues, expenditures, and distribution of aid and resources. Bethel Church, which was established in 1793, evolved out of this organization, as did the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Among the founding members of Bethel Church were several women, including Jane Ann Murray and Sarah Dougherty, who were also charter members of the Free African Society.⁸ Because the first congregations were so small, women continued to serve active roles in their local churches. However, they were not included in the leadership of either the Free African Society or the early churches, which were dominated by males from their inception. From the outset, women were determined to gain a place in leadership in the Society and later in the church.⁹

Women labored beside their men to establish the young church, in the process learning the polity, practice and structure of the church from its foundation. Jualynne

⁸ Jualynne Dodson, *Engendering Church: Women, Power, and the AME Church* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 2002), 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2; 17.

Dodson writes that they would later use this knowledge in their contest for structural participation.¹⁰ As it was, within the laity and in the early years of the denomination, women functioned autonomously for the most part. They were often able to fulfill certain traditionally male functions because they were the only ones available to do so. As long as they did not demand official recognition and placement, this practice was allowed to continue. The church grew rapidly, and when the first General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was convened in April 1816,¹¹ a number of women were present, although they were not voting members of the conference. Richard Allen's wife, Sarah, served as hostess; Doritha Hill, married to a leading member of the Society, most likely accompanied her husband. It is reasonable to assume that wives of other leaders were also in attendance.¹²

The meeting, held at Bethel Church in Philadelphia, drew sixteen representatives from five cities: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Maryland; Wilmington, Delaware; Attlesboro, Pennsylvania; and Salem, New Jersey. The purpose of the meeting was to establish a connection joining the member churches into a single unit. A connectional church links all local congregations under the authority of a central government, in this case that established by the *Methodist Book of Discipline*.¹³ Women

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ White, 5-7; also, *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church 2000*, (Nashville: The African Methodist Episcopal Church Sunday School Union, 2001), 5-6.

¹² Dodson, 15.

¹³ Ibid.; after the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church as a connectional entity, the Methodist Discipline was used as the foundation for development and writing of the new African Methodist Episcopal Church Discipline.

were present, but were not included in the decision-making process or in voting. No women are named among the list of sixteen delegates at the convention.

From the beginning of the denomination, though, women who felt the call to preach endeavored to put their calling into practice. They faced the prohibitions of the male leadership of the AME Church, which denied them that right. Jarena Lee, an African-American preaching woman of the nineteenth century, was forced to contend with this patriarchal bias in the church for many years as she attempted to answer her call. Although Reverend Richard Allen refused in 1809 to grant her an official license to preach, Lee nevertheless began in 1820 to travel and preach extensively throughout the New York-New Jersey region with a group of AME ministers. Two years later, restrictions on Black movement and liberty were drastically increased following the Denmark Vesey rebellion, but another African-American preaching woman, Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, traveled and preached throughout Maryland—again, without official sanction of the church. Other women during this era, determined to answer what they recognized as a divine calling, disregarded the prohibitions men sought to impose upon them and continued their efforts to serve God. Among these were Harriet Felson Taylor of the Washington, D.C. area and Rachel Evans, who served in the New Jersey Annual Conference.¹⁴

As the new church continued to grow, women's participation was prohibited in both the conference system and in the local church. All offices in ministry, laity, and

¹⁴ Lincoln, 279.

conference were held by men. Although the Discipline restricted authorized activity by women, this did not preclude their functioning outside the formal structure. Thus, they began to fill such roles as organization and management within the church.¹⁵ In the laity, women were able to utilize a small measure of formal space to participate in the “organizational arrangements” of the church.¹⁶

One of their first organized activities was essentially domestic in nature, for the purpose of repairing the clothing of ministers attending the 1816 Conference. Seeing that the delegates were arriving in Philadelphia dusty and disheveled from their travels, the women determined that their assistance was needed in order to have the men make a more acceptable appearance. They banded together to do what mending and cleaning was necessary so that the men would be suitably attired during their meetings. This practice spread throughout other congregations, and became a regular function of the women of the conference. Dodson writes that in this way, women “asserted themselves into the men’s deliberations” in order to “make space for women’s presence where no such space officially existed.”¹⁷

This group of women, although not a formal association of the church, became known as the Daughters of Conference, and before too long had established themselves as a vital and needed partner to the church body. Soon the Daughters of Conference added financial support to the list of services offered to the church. At the Conference of

¹⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁶ Dodson, Ibid.

¹⁷ Dodson, 44.

1826, the male delegates formally and publicly thanked these Daughters of Conference for a financial contribution.¹⁸

Women were able to serve in such capacities in the church as teachers, exhorters, and evangelists. Officially, only men were authorized to serve as class leaders after appointment by the pastor. Even so, women also served as class leaders despite the fact that they had not received official sanction. In cases where the number of men was insufficient, women were also allowed to preach unofficially. Some women accepted these limitations, while others, like Rebecca Jackson, left the AME Church in protest against the restrictions placed on women. As mentioned elsewhere, Jackson went on to successfully establish a black Shaker denomination.

Despite continued agitation by its female members, the AME Church persisted in its policy of prohibiting women from leadership. An editorial in the July 1852 *Christian Recorder*, an official AME journal, made the church's position clear:

Four years ago [1848] this subject of licensing women to preach in the church came up for consideration before the General Conference in the form of a petition for the Daughters of Zion. It then went so far in their favor that they were granted permission to preach in our churches, but not to receive licenses from the Conference. They again petitioned this General Conference [1852] to grant their license in all respects as men are licensed, and so to graduate to the highest office in the church.¹⁹

The measure was defeated, although it would be re-introduced at the next General conference, and again in 1868. Although the measure was again defeated in 1868, the Conference did create the positions of Stewardess, female evangelist, and deaconess at

¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹ Dodson, 93.

this time in order to provide women a place to serve.²⁰ The women's efforts continued unabated until 1884, when women were first licensed to preach in the AME Church.²¹

In 1846, women made up sixty per cent of the AME membership. By 1989, the estimated membership of the denomination was more than 2.2 million.²² By 1990, according to Lincoln and Mamiya's figures, it was estimated that more than seventy percent of the current membership of AME churches were women, while the estimated number of male pastors was ninety-five percent.²³ Women continue to point out that the history of the AME Church reflects that in nearly every instance the majority of founding members of new churches were women. In some cases, women made up as much as ninety percent of the organizers of new AME churches. Dodson reports that the first congregations were often as small as eight to fifteen members, and the majority of these were women. These women shouldered an equal weight in terms of the work needed to establish and grow the fledgling churches. Yet women have had to fight for the right to serve as preachers, pastors, and in other leadership roles within the church. The fact that women were categorized as the backbone and support of the church throughout its history did not ameliorate the limitations they faced in their desire to take on a more active role in leadership and ministry.

²⁰ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 286; Dodson, 3.

²¹ Dodson, 32.

²² Lincoln and Mamiya, 54.

²³ Deborah A. Austin, "In the Middle of Everyday Life: The Spaces Black Clergywomen Create," in *The Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*. Randall Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 210.

In other areas of the church, women were more successful in carving out a space for themselves. Although they were even restricted from serving as missionaries when the church was in its infancy, Dodson relates that one example of women's success in exerting their influence in the church was in the matter of missionary assignments. Determined to be actively involved in the decisions of the church — especially when they believed the church leadership was making an incorrect decision — the women withheld financial contributions until church leaders agreed to their recommendations concerning missionary appointments. The Women's Missionary Society was created in 1844, officially formalizing work done by the women of the church for nearly a century. Even so, the act was accompanied by a significant amount of controversy and dissension within the church. According to Dodson, some male leaders feared that formally organizing and recognizing women as an official organ of the church opened the door to their assuming even more power and authority in church matters.

Official recognition of a person's call to preach is required before that person is allowed to preach in any AME church.²⁴ Such a license to preach was denied to women for nearly a century after the founding of the church. Richard Allen's refusal to grant a license to Jarena Lee was not surprising. In 1817, when she was finally recognized as a preacher, Lee was authorized only as an exhorter. She did not receive ordination into the ministry. Many women answered the call to preach during the nineteenth century, but did so without receiving ordination or recognition from the church. Some became traveling preachers with no church affiliation; others started independent churches; still

²⁴ An exception is made for guest speakers, who must nonetheless be approved by the host pastor in order to occupy the pulpit of his or her church.

others left the AME Church and affiliated with predominantly white denominations where they were allowed to preach and to receive ordination.

The AME Church first issued a license to preach to a woman in 1884. It was over 160 years later that the first woman was ordained in the AME Church. The effort was made in 1885, when Bishop Henry McNeal Turner ordained Sarah Hughes an itinerant deacon. His action was rescinded two years later by Bishop Jabez P. Campbell. Campbell's action was affirmed by the General Conference of 1888, held in Indianapolis, Indiana. At the same Conference, however, the church confirmed women as evangelists. It was not until forty-eight years later that Martha Jane Keys, a pastor and evangelist from Kentucky, initiated the legal challenge to women's exclusion from ordination when she introduced a bill at the General Conference of 1936 calling for the ordination of women. Her bill failed, and it took another twelve years for the Conference to yield and authorize women's ordination as local deacons. In 1956, the Conference authorized women's ordination as local elders. The offices of itinerant deacon and itinerant elder were opened to women at the General Conference of 1960.²⁵

From the time that women were first authorized as itinerant deacons and itinerant elders, they intensified their assault upon the last remaining restraints upon their service. Even after the significant milestone of ordination was attained, the roles of presiding elder and bishop were reserved exclusively to men. In addition, women who were given a charge seldom received appointment to the more prestigious churches. Many were assigned as associate pastors, where they filled jobs such as youth ministry, women's

²⁵ Dennis C. Dickerson, "The Making of a Female Bishop: 'From Jarena Lee to Vashti Murphy McKenzie'," *The AME Review* Vol. CXVI No. 378 (Summer 2000), 14-16.

ministry, and other secondary roles.²⁶ After ordination into the ministry, the next level of authority in the AME Church is that of presiding elder. A presiding elder serves at what could be considered the middle management level in the AME Church, in an administrative position in which he or she supervises a group of churches in a district of the AME Conference. The presiding elder is responsible for receiving periodic reports from the churches under his or her charge, making recommendations to the bishop of that district for the purpose of pastoral assignments, re-assignments, and other matters that concern the congregations and clergy of his or her district.

Bishop Frederick H. Talbot broke with the tradition of nearly two centuries when he appointed Reverend Dorothy Millicent Stephens Morris Acting Presiding Elder in 1973. A year later, he made her appointment permanent. In 1976, he appointed Reverend Helen C. Patrick presiding elder. But it was nearly ten years after Bishop Talbot's groundbreaking action of 1974 before another bishop, Reverend Vinton R. Anderson, appointed Cornelia Wright presiding elder in 1983.²⁷ At this writing, the appointment of a woman as presiding elder is still a matter of intense interest and by no means routine.

The effort to break through what is being called the stained glass ceiling barring women from the bishopric endured through centuries. The first woman to launch a

²⁶ Assignments to pastor a church are determined by the bishop who heads the annual conference to which the minister is assigned. Often a newly ordained minister remains associated with the church from which he or she was ordained unless assigned to his/her own pastorate. His/her title is "associate minister." Once assigned to a church, the associate may be given a particular assignment such as youth minister by the pastor in charge.

²⁷ Dickerson, "The Making of a Female Bishop," 14.

campaign for bishop was Carrie Thomas Hooper, a pastor from New York. In 1964, Hooper declared her candidacy for office. Most women more than likely did not expect success from their candidacies during this period; they were striving, in essence, to keep constant pressure on the church leadership, and to keep their cause in the public view. Thus, in every succeeding Episcopal election after 1964, at least one woman was on the ballot.

After Carrie Hooper, the women who stood for election to the episcopacy between 1964 and 1996 included Elizabeth Scott, who declared as a candidate at the General Conferences of 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996. Louise Harris, who was on the ballots of 1988 and 1992, was an Ohio pastor. Gloria Barrett, a candidate in 1992 and 1996, served as a pastor in the West Virginia Annual Conference. Delores Jacobs, who declared as a candidate in 1992, was founder and pastor of Canaan AME Church of Long Island, New York in the Delaware Annual Conference.²⁸ Recognizing that their candidacies would not initially be successful, these women nevertheless believed they were laying a foundation that would ultimately bear fruit. The women who ran for bishop during this time generally received only a few votes, the highest tallies going to Elizabeth Scott, who garnered seventy-six votes on the first ballot in the election of 1988 and Delores Jacobs, who had one hundred five votes on the second ballot in 1992. Some women got as few as two, three or four votes. It was important to the women, however, that they continue to make their presence and their intent known by standing for election at every General Conference.

²⁸ Ibid.

Nevertheless, there has been considerable progress in the matter of church assignments. For many years, the practice in the AME Church was to assign new bishops to African districts as their first Episcopal assignment. The added fact that there were few African candidates for bishop for many years also militated against the assignment of native Africans to the districts on the African continent. Thus, American bishops led most African episcopacies. Before the 2004 General Conference of the AME Church, the decision was made to elect African leaders for the AME churches in Africa to the greatest extent possible. The leadership of the church believed it only fitting that African prelates lead the church in Africa. The "set-aside" proposed for the 2004 election was designed to ensure that African candidates would be elected and would serve in African districts. It was for this reason that in 2004 the election of bishops to serve Episcopal districts in Africa was held separately from the general election. This provision assured that indigenous Africans would fill at least three of the eight open positions.

For an even longer period, the General Board of the AME Church had engaged in extensive discussions about the campaign to elect a woman bishop in 2000. Dr. Jamye Coleman Williams, the first woman elected a General Officer in the AME Church, relates that the debate was fierce and ongoing, with much of the political maneuverings one would expect in a secular realm. Eventually, Bishop Frank Cummings made a formal recommendation addressing the question during the annual Episcopal Address in 1996. The Episcopal Address, designed to present the State of the Church and make recommendations for the future, is generally considered to be a reflection of the entire

council of bishops. Recommendation number 9, that the AME commit itself to the election of a woman to the office of bishop and formulate an action plan to do so in the future, was a significant advance for the cause of women's equality. Even so, the vagueness of the statement did not fully mollify the women of the church, who wanted a more definitive statement and a definite time line for accomplishment of this recommendation. The women were also concerned that the terminology of the recommendation specifically mentioned one woman as opposed to the more inclusive term "women."²⁹ They interpreted the use of the singular term to be an indication of the church's desire to limit the number of women given access.

There are twenty Episcopal districts in the AME Church. The idea that only one slot was to be dedicated to a female was galling to many who had fought for the change. Some questioned why, with a membership that is predominantly female, the church had not moved to elect more women bishops in proportion to their presence in the membership of the church. The popular *Daily Report*, an unofficial but highly respected daily summary of Conference events, had two comments: first, a pointed reminder that "The women of African Methodism did not just appear on the scene," and second, that the "strategic plans that must be developed" were in fact already in place. The bishops, wrote the editors, could take action at any time to effect their recommendation. The editors went on to remind their readers that the previous recommendation for the election

²⁹ A. Lewis Williams, Sr. *The A. Lewis Williams Daily Report* Vol. 15 No. 3 (June 28, 1996), 4; Jamye Coleman Williams, Interview by Author, tape recording, Atlanta, Georgia, May 19, 2006.

of an “overseas person” – meaning an indigenous African – had been readily accomplished when it was made. The writer closed with a reminder of the obvious – “There are two women on the ballot for Bishop at this General Conference”³⁰ The obvious implication was that both women be elevated to the episcopacy.

Carolyn Tyler Guidry, then a Presiding Elder out of the Los Angeles-Pasadena District in the Southern California Conference, was the first truly viable candidate for Episcopal office. Tyler Guidry had already made AME history when Bishop Vinton R. Anderson appointed her the first female presiding elder in Southern California’s Fifth District in 1992. In the election of 1996, Tyler Guidry made an impressive showing, with 190 votes on the first ballot and 153 on the third. Women finally saw a female candidate who demonstrated the kind of support that might mean victory for women in their aspirations to the episcopacy. Reverend Tyler Guidry became the forerunner and the best hope for a female bishop in decades. It was expected that she would be able to build on her good showing of 1996 at the next General Conference and go on to become the first female bishop. At the General Conference of 2000, a second female candidate in the person of Reverend Vashti Murphy McKenzie, a pastor from Baltimore, declared for office. In a surprising development, Reverend McKenzie forged an alliance with several males on the ticket and emerged victorious with a plurality of votes on the second ballot. Presiding Elder Tyler Guidry finished fifth in a contest to fill four seats. Some within the denomination believed Tyler Guidry should have won a spot in the episcopacy – especially considering her impressive showing in the election of 1996 – and but for the

³⁰ Ibid.

alliance entered into by McKenzie with the male candidates, she would have had the honor of being the first woman elected bishop rather than McKenzie. In 2004, however, Tyler Guidry entered the race once more, and was subsequently selected as the 122nd elected and consecrated bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. With her in victory in 2004 was Sarah Frances Davis, a San Antonio pastor, who became the 126th elected and consecrated bishop of the AME Church.³¹

Jacquelyn Grant sees the election of McKenzie in 2000 as significant on three levels. First, in consideration of the liberation theology paradigm, the expectation is that the African Methodist Episcopal Church is now at last moving "towards the ultimate goal of the liberation of women."³² Grant views this event as bringing the AME church back into the province of its historical position as an agent of liberation and justice. Second, says Grant, the long history of the church's victimization of women based on nothing more than gender is coming to an end. As other writers have stated elsewhere, the church does itself a disservice when willing and capable workers are denied the opportunity to serve simply by virtue of their sex. If God is no respecter of persons, then these women who have persevered through a multitude of obstacles should be welcomed to serve, and to continue their legacy of good works. Grant reminds us of the many strong women of the Bible, who serve as examples of female leadership in response to God's call. She writes:

³¹ Dickerson, 14.

³² Jacquelyn Grant, "A Crack, A Break, A Shattering: State of the Glass: A Theological Interpretation of the Election of Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie" *The AME Church Review* Vol. CXVI No. 378 (Summer 2000), 17.

“The black community and the black church both have traditions of women serving faithfully in spite of institutional obstacles... . God does not dismiss the work of women who have given their service to the church. . . . The Church cannot continue to place its patriarchal agenda on God. . . . God is an equal opportunity employer.”³³

The third factor is that the election of these women to the episcopacy in the black church serves as a role model that widens the possibilities for other women. Grant, like Tyler Guidry, is ever aware of the need for the symbolism of women in the leadership of the church as an example for other women, especially youth. Grant cites an example in her own family, wherein her four-year-old niece asserted that her aunt could not be a preacher, “. . . ’cause [you] wear earrings.” The indoctrination of society that women can occupy only certain roles has been reinforced for decades by the absence of female leaders at the highest levels of the church. In order to encourage young women to think outside the box of male domination, the presence of female exemplars is vital. Females, Grant writes, need “an opportunity to know that it has been done and it can (and ought to) be done again.”³⁴

Thus, while the election of three women to the episcopacy at the General Conferences of 2000 and 2004 is seen as the culmination of more than 200 years of struggle, the perception persists that it is only the beginning of change for women in the church. It is important for church leaders, scholars, ministers and laity alike to know how women accomplished these changes. All of the aforementioned as well as many churchwomen are also watching to see what long-term ramifications will result from

³³ Ibid., 19.

³⁴ Ibid.

these elections. African-American clergywomen, who do not believe the recent events signal an end to their struggles, are interested in how to continue the advances signaled by these elections. Questions remain, then, about the election of three women to the episcopacy as related to the future of women in the church. An analysis of the particular qualities and attributes these three women possess which gave them access at this time might be beneficial to other women seeking inroads to the hierarchy of the church. Similarly, the meaning of these changes to the future of African Methodism is also a matter of some importance to the entire church membership. These questions are not merely academic; the answers will have a long-term impact on the structure and nature of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Summary

Women have agitated for inclusion in church leadership since the church began in 1787. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their efforts encompassed the most basic of religious activity within the church—the right to preach. In the twentieth century, those efforts expanded to include a share of the power and leadership of the church. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, women leveled their sights on the highest levels of AME leadership, the episcopacy. Beginning in 1964, at least one woman declared her candidacy for the office of bishop in every election at the General Conference of the AME Church. As the time approaches for the next General Conference in 2008, interest grows as to the next woman candidate who has a reasonable chance of election as bishop. Activists want to know if they can expect the election of women to the episcopacy to become a normal and regular occurrence in the church.

The effort of women to break the stained glass ceiling leading to the episcopacy took more than two centuries between the founding of the AME denomination and the election of a woman bishop. The question arises, then, why women faced such tremendous obstacles for so long. Women had to overcome a formidable challenge in order to answer the call to preach. In the beginning of the church, a specific prohibition in the AME Doctrine forbade them this right. Women were formally proscribed from taking on the role of leaders – whether pastors, superintendents, presiding elders, or bishops. The research will attempt to show how Vashti Murphy McKenzie, Carolyn Tyler Guidry, and Sarah Frances Davis overcome these obstacles.

Some members of the church continue to believe that scripturally, women are not to take the position of leaders of the church. Some maintain that Paul's admonition to women to remain silent in the church meant that women were to have no part in church leadership, and that such an interpretation is as valid today as then. Others believe this is an erroneous interpretation of scripture, and that the church loses a vital and proven resource when it bars its women from full service in the church. All such permutations of the question impact upon the changes fast being made in the AME Church, and may yet have a determining effect on the future development of women's place in ministry.

Beginning in 1979, African-American women religious scholars began to advance a new theology based on the life experience of women. Charging that their male counterparts had been insensitive and, in some cases, overtly hostile to black women's experiences in the church and in society, these women presented a new religious theory aligned with the concept of womanism which was drawn from writings by Alice Walker.

The efforts of this group of women religious scholars who called themselves womanists has significantly advanced the cause of women in ministry, and also fostered a new awareness on the part of male theologians to gain an understanding of the unique plight of black women in American society and in the black church. This research will endeavor to ascertain to what extent this new awareness was responsible for the opening of opportunity for women within the AME Church. Further, the research investigates to what extent this new movement impacted the careers of these particular three women. The researcher has attempted to document the journey each woman took, and the particular qualities and attributes they possess that facilitated their selection at this time.

An attempt has been made to reach reasonable conclusions regarding the anticipated effect the election of Vashti McKenzie in 2000 and of Carolyn Tyler Guidry and Sarah Frances Davis in 2004 will have on women's future roles in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In particular, the impetus that spurred these women to seek the episcopacy is under investigation. Further, the researcher attempted to determine how sensitive each woman is and will be to making appointments of other women to major posts within the church hierarchy. The ways in which women have wielded their power and influence as bishops since their elections has been analyzed. Additionally, the research seeks to ascertain whether it is reasonable to expect that the criteria utilized by women bishops in making appointments will differ significantly from those of their male counterparts.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: THE WOMEN BISHOPS OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The three women of this case study were ordained within the last generation and served in a major metropolitan church relatively early in their careers. They range from fifty-one to sixty-nine years of age. Because the mandatory retirement age for bishops is seventy-five in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the average length of each woman's tenure will be thirteen years. Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie, whose retirement year is 2022, will have the longest tenure at twenty-four years. Bishop Sarah Frances Davis, who will serve for nineteen years, is to retire in 2023; and Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry's term will span eight years, ending in 2012. Bishop Tyler Guidry has speculated that the election of McKenzie in 2000 was providential, because had she, Tyler Guidry, been elected, the leadership of the church might well have decided not to elevate another woman until after the end of her term in 2012. She believes the selection of a woman whose term of service was to encompass more than twenty years made the prospect of other women serving during the same time more palatable.

Vashti Murphy McKenzie

Vashti Murphy McKenzie made history in the annals of black church tradition when she was elected the one hundred seventeenth bishop of the African Methodist

Episcopal Church in July 2000. Her election culminated over 200 years of struggle by African Methodist women to break the barriers limiting their full participation in the church. This historic event was heralded from every quarter, with the frequent declaration that the stained glass ceiling had at last been shattered.

Vashti Murphy was born in Baltimore, Maryland on May 28, 1947. Although her parents belonged to the local Episcopal church, her family had a strong tradition within the AME Church as well. Her great-grandfather, John Murphy, was a prominent AME officer who served as Superintendent of Sunday School at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and published the *Sunday School Helper*. John Murphy eventually took this publication, which was printed in the basement of the church, and developed it into what became *The Afro-American* newspaper. This newspaper became the family legacy: McKenzie's father inherited its leadership from his father, and McKenzie served, in turn, as a columnist for the paper.

The Murphy family was always actively involved in community affairs. Grandmother Vashti Turley Murphy was one of the founders of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., a public service sorority founded in 1913. Although McKenzie attended the Episcopal Church as a child, she decided in her early twenties to return to her family's roots, and she united with Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore, where Reverend John R. Bryant (now Bishop John R. Bryant) was pastor. Reverend Bryant was one of her earliest mentors; it was under his tutelage that she

answered the call to preach and entered ordained ministry.¹ Reverend Cecelia Williams Bryant, currently Episcopal Supervisor of the Fifth District where her husband serves as Bishop, was then first lady of Bethel. McKenzie credits Reverend Williams Bryant, as well as other women in the ministry of the church, as positive role models and exemplars for her as she began in ministry.

After answering the call to preach, McKenzie was ordained itinerant deacon in 1984 and an itinerant elder in 1986. Her first pastoral assignment was to a circuit in Chesapeake, Maryland, comprised of Bethel AME Church and Ebenezer AME Church. On a circuit, services are usually not held every Sunday because one pastor serves two or more churches. On this circuit, service would ordinarily be held on alternate Sundays at each church. Because the churches were so small—seven members at Bethel and fewer than thirty members at Ebenezer—and because they were geographically close together, Reverend McKenzie decided to hold a combined service for both churches. When she held her first funeral, a large number of people attended the service. Thinking to herself, “Where did all these people come from—I have seven members!” Reverend McKenzie recognized the bountiful harvest of potential members. She determined that she would follow the advice she had received from her ordination preacher, Bishop Harrison Bryant. “If you go and burn,” Bishop Bryant had told her class, “then the people will come and watch you burn.” And so, she says, she was inspired to burn in the pulpit. “And they

¹ Vashti Murphy McKenzie, Telephone Interview by author, tape recording, Atlanta, Georgia, May 18, 2006.

said, 'Wow! There's a woman up here preaching . . . we're going to come back and check it out!' And so our church grew . . .² From that service, those who came and saw the passion with which Reverend McKenzie preached were inspired to return, and the church began to grow.

As pastor of two churches, Reverend McKenzie determined the work that was needed at each site and developed a plan of action. At one site, that entailed a renovation and beautification project; at the other, with a better physical plant, she decided what the church needed was a spiritual makeover. She recounts:

Many times, when you have small congregations, people fall into the trap, "Well, we're a small church, we can't do this. We're a small church, we can't do that." My philosophy was, there's no such thing as a small church. It's people with small faith. And a church is as big as its faith is. We serve a big God. So, you may only have a handful of people, or two handfuls [sic] of people, but you can do whatever God calls you to do I began to pray and ask God for a vision for the church.³

She received an answer: in order to reinvigorate the church, she should hold a revival. At the outdoor tent revival that was subsequently held, more than one hundred people gave their lives to Christ. Bishop McKenzie says:

People came from all over the county, from Delaware, from Pennsylvania They were blessed, lives were changed and transformed. And . . . not only was the spiritual goal met, it was exceeded...one hundred seven people gave their lives to Christ that week. And so the whole year it was like one hundred twenty seven people giving their lives to Christ in these two tiny little churches on the eastern shore; and they raised more money that week than they had all year. That wasn't the intention, but that was the

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

outpouring.⁴

McKenzie's second charge was Oak Street AME Church in Baltimore, Maryland, and her third charge was the 103-year-old Payne Memorial AME in Baltimore. When she received her appointment in 1990, it marked the first time a female pastor had been assigned to this historic church, and only the second time a woman had been appointed to a major metropolitan church in the African Methodist Episcopal Connection. During her tenure there, membership increased from 300 members to 1700. The value of the church's real estate holdings increased to \$5.6 million. A large part of this impressive increase was Payne Memorial's purchase of a five-story office building, which was then renovated. Twenty-five new ministries were introduced during the ten years McKenzie led Payne Memorial AME. Among them were a \$1.5 million welfare-to-work program that enabled nearly 600 men and women to leave public assistance and enter the workforce. The church also worked with local schools, began an initiative to place computers in the schools, and established a plethora of community service programs.⁵

Vashti Murphy McKenzie was elected and consecrated the one hundred seventeenth bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in July 2000. After her historic election, McKenzie's first assignment was to the Eighteenth Episcopal District, serving Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland, and Mozambique. Bishop McKenzie left an indelible mark on this Southern African region, putting her energies to addressing the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.; Stone Brown, "The Rev. Vashti McKenzie: A Bishop for the New Millennium" *Crisis* November-December 2000, 30.

needs of the people of her district. Instituting a housing program for orphaned children and building temporary homes in the wake of massive flooding in Mozambique, the Eighteenth District also led the effort in providing a solution for the millions of children orphaned by the AIDS pandemic. Funding and construction of the first of a scheduled five group homes provided shelter and the stability of a home for thirty-six children. It was a small fraction of the needs of more than a million children, McKenzie acknowledged, but it was a beginning. She might have added that it was by no means the end of what the church could and would do to serve the needs of these children.

Throughout her ministry, McKenzie has exhibited a love and concern for children. In addition to her involvement in school facilities, educational programs, and shelter for children, she also developed community service programs such as the Collective Banking Group, an initiative in conjunction with other local churches and banks that assured the community equal opportunity and treatment by lending institutions.

Asked whether her election has eradicated the centuries-old restrictions and limitations that women have faced in securing leadership roles in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop McKenzie replied, "Power does not give up without a fight. It concedes nothing. I believe there still needs to be . . . a conscious effort to be sure that women who are qualified and have expertise have the same kind of opportunities their male counterparts do."⁶ The election of three women bishops means simply that there are

⁶ Ibid.

three women bishops, according to McKenzie's interpretation. "It doesn't mean the sexism has been eradicated in the church," she stated. However, regarding the impact her election has had and will have on future generations of young women who receive a call to ministry, she said:

I think women individually are empowered by our election because they see what is possible Recently I was . . . sitting in the airport, and some Duke Divinity student women who were on their way somewhere to a Conference . . . just walked up and said "Thank you." And I said, "For what?" "Because you encourage us. Your election, what you do, what has happened, opens the door of possibilities in our own minds."⁷

She went on to say:

You know, sometimes . . . the prison we live in is one that we construct ourselves. I mean, we walk into the cell and we lock the door, because our mind cannot . . . conceive that this is possible for us. Then when someone else does it, you know maybe God can work this time It opens up a plethora of possibilities and potential for other women in their own minds. In their own minds.⁸

Carolyn Tyler Guidry

Carolyn Tyler Guidry was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1937. She is a woman who does not shrink from stepping out on faith. As leader of the Sixteenth Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop Carolyn stated that she lives by Luke 5:4: "Launch out into the deep...put into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." The evidence of Bishop Guidry's willingness to "launch out into the deep" has indeed launched can be seen in throughout her career in the church.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Coming from a family that was instrumental in founding the first African Methodist Episcopal church in Jackson, Mississippi, Carolyn was active in the church from an early age. She states:

My grandmother, Pauline Cole Johnson, was one of the founders of the [Bonner] Institutional AME Church in Jackson, Mississippi, and so from the time that I remember, I was at the church . . . I grew up there being a Mothers Sunbeamer, YPDer, and then later, as a young woman, a member of the missionary society . . . Everything I learned about Jesus, about public speaking, about involvement in the church was learned in that church in Jackson, Mississippi . . .⁹

Although separated from McKenzie by only a decade, Tyler Guidry had a vastly different experience when she received the call to preach. Raised by her mother and grandmother, she knew even as a young child that she wanted to serve God in the church. She says:

I think that there is a point where all of your life you've known that there was something. I can remember when I was eight years old and my pastor said, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and because I didn't know that women were allowed to preach, of course I didn't say a preacher, I said, "I'd like to be a missionary."¹⁰

Carolyn began teaching Sunday School at the age of thirteen. She says she first felt the pull of a call to ministry in the late 1960s, but successfully resisted answering. She completed her Associate of Arts degree in business and secretarial science. She later received a degree in business and economics at Tougaloo College.

When she and her husband moved to Los Angeles in 1964, she joined Second AME Church where she continued to wrestle with her call to preach. But because she was

⁹ Carolyn Tyler Guidry, Interview by Author, tape recording, Montgomery, Alabama, April 14, 2006.

¹⁰ Ibid.

born and raised at a time when women did not routinely go into ministry, she continued to resist the call for several more years. One day in 1973, as her pastor delivered the message, she says, "It was as though I was transported into a different place, and I saw myself standing before this large crowd of people and I was preaching, and it was the first time that in my own spirit I saw myself as preaching."¹¹ Going to the altar, she asked for prayer, and later talked to her pastor, Reverend Chester D. Toliver, who encouraged her to accept the call to preach. She was ordained itinerant deacon in the Southern California Conference in 1975, and as an itinerant elder in 1977.

Her husband, Cary, was always very supportive. Ironically, Tyler Guidry says now, her husband never had any reservations about her call. "I had the reservations," she says. And when she was struggling with her calling, she tried to bargain with God, saying,

I'd love to be a preacher's wife; call my husband, he's a good man I have five sons, they're going to be wonderful men; you can have five preachers – and it's interesting that even then I didn't say, 'I have five sons and a daughter.' You know even then I was thinking more like what the society thought, that women shouldn't do this.¹²

Her husband's response, though, was that if she was called into ministry, then they both were called. He willingly moved each time she was re-assigned, even attended bible school with her and helped with research and sermon preparation.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Her ordination in 1977 marked the first time a woman was ordained an itinerant elder in the Southern California Conference. Her first pastoral assignment was First AME Church in Indio, California. Reverend Tyler became well-known for building up churches and increasing membership, establishing community programs, and for her activism in community affairs. Beginning with her first pastoral assignment in Indio, Tyler Guidry has demonstrated her ability to reinvigorate a struggling church. Her first projects were to establish a day care center and to boost church membership. Bishop Charlie E. Simmons, pastor of Mt. Calvary Holy Church—now Holy Church, a Pentecostal church in Indio— says she “remodeled everything around First AME (Indio) and gave it a ‘faith lift’.” The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funded the Unity Center for Human development, which she founded and directed.¹³ As a community activist, she was involved in social as well as political events. Cain Memorial AME Church in Bakersfield, her second pastoral assignment, benefited from the same kinds of work. The church bought surrounding property, established a day care center, and developed community programs.

Widowed in 1988, Tyler moved back to Los Angeles where, in 1989, she was assigned to pastor Walker Temple AME Church—another milestone, as she was the first woman appointed to a major metropolitan church in the African Methodist Episcopal connection. In 1994, continuing the tradition of firsts, Tyler became the first female presiding elder in the Fifth Episcopal District, named to that post by Bishop Vinton R.

¹³ Dennis C. Dickerson. “The Female Presiding Elders in the African Methodist Episcopal Church” *The AME Church Review*, Vol. CXVIII No. 385 (January-March 2002), 17.

Anderson. Her territory encompassed twenty-two churches in the Los Angeles/Pasadena District. She was married to Don Guidry in 1998, being blessed, she says, with a second husband who was entirely supportive of her ministry. He knew when he met her that she was a preacher, was a presiding elder, and was totally supportive of that.

Reverend Tyler Guidry continued to be very involved in social and community affairs, garnering recognition and awards for her tireless work in the community. Among her many accolades and achievements during her service as presiding elder were: chair of the Southeast District of the American Rd Cross; AME Church Women's representative to Consultation on Church Union; Vice President of the Fifth Episcopal District Presiding Elder Council; African Methodist Episcopal Church representative to the United Methodist Church General Commission on the Status and Role of Women; President of the AME Women in Ministry; Secretary of the Board of the John F. Kennedy Hospital in Indio, CA; and treasurer of the National One Church One Child. Bishop Tyler Guidry is chair of the Social Action Commission of the AME Church General Board, a position she also held as Presiding Elder. She has been recognized by *Ebony Magazine* as a Woman of the Year; honored by the Women's Legislative Caucus of the State of California; recognized by the National Council of Negro Women as one of the "Black Women Who Make Things Happen"; and received awards from many groups including Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Top Ladies of Distinction in Los Angeles; and was the first woman to preach the opening sermon at an annual conference in the Fifth Episcopal District.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid.

Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry is one of a new breed of women in ministry who have been well-prepared academically to take their place in the church. After receiving her undergraduate education at J.P. Campbell College and Tougaloo College in Mississippi, she entered the corporate world. Prior to entering the ministry, Tyler Guidry was employed for a dozen years in the banking industry.¹⁵ She left that endeavor to undertake religious training, earning a four-year certificate in Religion and Bible from Los Angeles Bible School and a Masters of Divinity from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

At Los Angeles Bible School, under the auspices of Talbot Seminary at Loyola University, Tyler Guidry came face-to-face with the intolerance that had kept women from pursuing a career in ministry. Discussing her reception as a female student, she says:

The majority of these [instructors] were very conservative evangelicals and Baptist-oriented, and the premise was that God does not call women to preach. Women can teach other women, can teach children [A]lmost every night that I was there, someone would make the statement in one context or another that God does not call women to preach¹⁶

She decided at that point that, despite what anyone else said, she knew she had been called, and that she was going to trust God to defend her. She did not worry about the obstacles any more after that. But the obstructions continued:

. . . [P]astoral counseling was offered to fourth year students I was

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Tyler Guidry Interview.

a student who declared that I am now Reverend Carolyn Tyler because I had been ordained as a deacon, and in my church could now be addressed as Reverend [T]hey refused to call me Reverend, it was "Sister"¹⁷

Yet another obstacle was placed in her path later in the year, when the board decreed that women could not take the pastoral counseling class. This was a serious blow to the aspirations of the female students because the course was a requirement for graduation, and this restriction threatened their future as ministers. But because she had a good friend in one of the men in the class, Tyler Guidry was able to use his taped lectures to study for the examination and thus pass the course. She graduated in May 1977, and was ordained an itinerant elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in November of that year. The school would not acknowledge her as a graduate, however, for many years.

Tyler Guidry says she did not often experience resistance to her assignment as pastor at the churches to which she was assigned, but she did encounter community resistance in one instance. In Indio, her first appointment, one of the local Baptist pastors informed her that his church would no longer fellowship with First AME Indio because his denomination was not allowed to recognize female pastors. On the other hand, another Baptist pastor, from the leading church in town, made her welcome and invited her to preach at his church from time to time. He even played a trick on the other Baptist preachers of the community one Easter Sunday. He secretly invited her to preach the sermon at a joint community service to be held at his church, but did not inform the other

¹⁷ Ibid.

ministers. Instead, he waited until they and their congregations had arrived and been seated in the church. It was then that he brought out Reverend Tyler and seated her in the chair reserved for the preacher. The other preachers were loath to do anything so blatantly rude as to rise and leave the church. At least three of those present, she said, did not want to share a pulpit with a woman, but they were forced on this occasion to participate in a service in which she was the preacher. The experience was, in her words, "interesting."

A clergywoman who considers herself a womanist, Bishop Carolyn has always been an advocate for women in the ministry and in church leadership, and has never been hesitant to make this viewpoint known. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* states that she habitually addresses young girls in the African Methodist Episcopal Church as "future bishops," continuing her not-so-subtle advocacy to change the perception church members have of women in the ministry. Her eldest son, Makungu Akinyele, who is an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, said, "She wants little girls to see the possibilities they have within the church. For her, the importance of being placed in this position by the church is not just an individual [accomplishment], but something she sees as an example to children, to women, and to men of god's image of the church."¹⁸ After co-sponsoring a 1995 General Board resolution to elect a woman to the episcopacy by 2000, Tyler Guidry was the first "serious" female candidate for bishop in

¹⁸ Cynthia Daniels, "New A.M.E. Bishop Will Take International Post" *Los Angeles Times*, July 17, 2004.

1996. Five women declared their candidacy and entered the race for bishop between 1964 and 1996.¹⁹ None had envisioned herself as a serious candidate, garnering at most only a few dozen votes each time. But they believed it was important to be sure a female presence was seen in the election at each General Conference.

Tyler Guidry was a member of the Women in Ministry when the matter of electing a woman to the council of Bishops was first officially broached in Bishop Frank Cummings' Episcopal Address in 1995. Seeing that no action was forthcoming after that occasion, she took the matter back to the Women In Ministry (WIM) commission and said to them that it was time to act. "We need to give them a date to work toward," she said. She co-wrote the resolution with the commission and the secretary of the WIM commission that by the year 2000, the church would elect a woman to the episcopacy:

This was in . . . about September of 1995. I was thinking about this and had been sending the resolution to people of interest and I thought, 'There's no woman running, and if nobody is running then how can a woman be elected?' Most of the women who had run up to that point . . . got 25 or 30 votes . . . and they would have very little assistance from other people . . . [S]o in November, just before our planning meeting in the Fifth District, I decided that I would run for bishop so that there could be a woman running . . . I sent in my information to the secretary of the church and registered.²⁰

In 1995, Tyler Guidry announced her candidacy. At the General Conference of 1996, she earned enough votes to be considered a serious candidate. This was the best showing of a female candidate since women had first begun to seek the episcopacy.

¹⁹ Dickerson, "The Female Presiding Elders," 18.

²⁰ Tyler Guidry Interview.

At the General Conference of 2000, Dr. Jamye Coleman Williams, retired General Officer of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; Reverend Sandra Blair, President of the AME Women in Ministry; and Mr. J. L. Williams, President of the Connectional Lay Organization joined in the effort on behalf of electing a woman bishop. A Special Resolution was introduced, reviewing the long history of AME women's struggle for inclusion and equality, beginning with Jarena Lee's request for a license to preach in 1817 and Martha Keys' fight for ordination in 1940. Arguing that the treatment of women in the church was akin to the suppression of African-Americans' aspirations in the larger society, and that women make up the majority of both church membership and seminary enrollment, the resolution went on to press for enactment of the 1995 General Board resolution and the 1996 Episcopal Address endorsement of women in the episcopacy. The historic elevation of women in the United Methodist Church, The Episcopal Church, and the nation of Islam were also cited as examples of religious groups that had broken traditions of centuries to place women in positions of leadership; it is telling, as well, that in all three instances the women so elevated were African- American. Reminding the Conference of the special efforts made at the 1984 convocation to elect Bishop Harold Ben Senatle from the African continent by what was termed a set-aside, the writers went on to petition the church to refrain from further

gender bias and to instruct the Episcopal committee to recommend that "of the number of bishops to be elected one shall be a woman."²¹

Presiding Elder Reverend Lonnie C. Wormley of the Los Angeles District also presented a Resolution to Set Aside in which he chronicled the struggles African Americans have endured throughout the history of the United States and the sacrifices made by martyrs and leaders including the African Methodist Episcopal Church:

... the male clergy must take the lead in ushering in a new day for female clergy persons. And Whereas the AME Church with all the accolades as titleholders for social equality limits these qualities to men only. Hypocritically sermons are preached relating to inclusiveness, which includes race, rich and poor, etc., but not the effeminate gender. The church does not practice what it preaches.²²

The combined force of the Lay, supportive male clergy, and the Women In Ministry helped to advance the cause of women in the episcopacy.

Reverend Tyler Guidry entered the race for the episcopacy again at the 2000 General Conference, where once more she garnered a significant number of votes; many believe she missed winning a spot in this election only because Vashti McKenzie, the second female candidate in 2000, forged an alliance with the male candidates on the ticket which gave her the victory. Tyler Guidry subsequently placed fifth, with

²¹ "Appendix 5A, General Conference African Methodist Episcopal Church Special Resolution July, 2000" from Clement W. Fugh, ed. *Minutes of the Forty-Sixth Quadrennial Session General Conference, African Methodist Episcopal Church* July 5-11, 2000.

²² Ibid.

McKenzie joining three male candidates in filling the four open positions. Vashti Murphy McKenzie was elected that year as the first woman bishop in the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Tyler Guidry never considered not running a third time, convinced that God had a reason for the selection of McKenzie, and that this was not Tyler Guidry's time. She believes if she had been elected in 2000, the Church would have been content and felt that it had done its duty by the women. It is her belief that no great effort would have been made to elect another woman until that term had been completed in 2012. God in His wisdom had selected McKenzie as bishop in 2000. She would have another opportunity. Her faith bore fruit in 2004 when she became the second female bishop in the history of the AME Church. On her election, and that of Sarah Frances Davis, the third woman elected bishop, Tyler Guidry said, "That's a great step for a church who in over 200 years didn't have one single woman on the bench."²³

Bishop Tyler Guidry's first Episcopal assignment is the Sixteenth District, which is comprised of 94 churches in 8 Conferences: Suriname-Guyana, Windward Islands, Virgin Islands, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba and London. Total AME Church membership in the region is about 10,000 members. Much of the region under her supervision is in a region steeped with poverty, low membership and financial challenges, but no one doubts that Bishop Carolyn will find a way to meet the challenges. She has found the women of the Sixteenth District very supportive, and believes her presence there has been a positive one. Since her arrival, she has seen an increase in the

²³ Daniels, Ibid.

number of women entering ministry. Of the ninety-four pastoral appointments she has made thus far, six have been women. Bishop Tyler Guidry has had the opportunity to appoint only one presiding elder since her term began; the Reverend Lenora Thompson-Prince was assigned to the Eastern District, Jamaica Conference, on May 13, 2006.

The Bishop will serve for eight years— through 2012— before mandatory retirement. “I’m not sure yet how God is going to use me over these next eight years,” she said, “but I’m excited about it, and I’m available. I’m waiting to see what God is going to do.”²⁴

Sarah France Davis

Sarah Frances Davis was born in 1948 to parents who were active in the Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas. She states that she was “always involved in the church,” but like other girls of her generation, it never occurred to her that her desire to serve was connected to a call from God to enter ministry. As a youth, she served as church musician, and was active as well in the choir, Sunday School, and the Baptist Training Union. Her community involvement was also wide-ranging; in addition to serving as student council president of her high school, she was the regional president of student councils, and was later elected the Lone Star (Texas) president of the student council. As part of her duties, she traveled extensively throughout the state. An incident during her

²⁴ Ibid.

youth, however, made her aware she had received a special calling from God that she could not ignore. She recalls:

I can remember a time when I was in eleventh grade when, in hindsight, knowing what I know now, I think that God was pulling me towards ministry I was always involved in the church My passion for God and the things of God just really kind of snowballed around that time and I got . . . extremely happy in the Lord one Sunday while I was ministering the music²⁵

Her parents thought she was having a nervous breakdown because of her hectic schedule of activities; they did not consider the possibility that this could be a religious experience. When Sarah regained consciousness, she found that the doctor had been called and she had been given a shot. Dr. Gibson, who served the community, recommended bed rest for a week or two, which upset Davis because, she says, “. . . there were things I needed to do.” Accustomed to obeying her parents, however, she submitted to the doctor’s recommendation. But she says now,

. . . that was probably the first beginning of my consciousness of God’s pulling me towards a more defined something in Him I did not interpret that as I interpret it now because there were no Bodies of women in the Baptist Church . . . [who would have Served as examples].²⁶

She says that she did not know enough to understand that this experience was really God calling her to Him, so the extent of her passion to serve was restricted to the idea of possibly teaching Sunday School and Baptist Training. Davis, like other girls of her

²⁵ Sarah Frances Davis, Interview by Author, tape recording, Houston, Texas, July 27, 2005.

²⁶ Ibid.

generation, did not consider going into ministry despite her involvement and service in the church from an early age. She felt she could fulfill her desire to serve the church through various auxiliary organizations.

Davis graduated from high school and college and entered the workforce as an executive with Southwest Bell. At Southwest Bell, she moved through the ranks quickly and rose to a position in middle management. But she was not fulfilled by her work in the corporate world, and says that one day she had just had enough:

I was at my desk and I had been there [at the job] two years and I remember talking to the Lord I said 'Lord, if you take me out of this place I will do whatever you want I am tired of this foolishness ' I left that middle level management job . . . and didn't know where I was going²⁷

But, she says, God knew where she was going. After a brief period in which she worked in other positions in the corporate world, Davis entered seminary and earned her Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees. Having united with the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1970 at the age of twenty-two, she was ordained itinerant deacon of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1990, and itinerant elder in 1992.

Her first assignment was to the Sealy Circuit, serving as pastor to the St. Paul AME and Prairie View AME Churches. Davis immediately entered into a program of action that resulted in the construction of a 350-seat sanctuary and fellowship hall at Prairie View. In 1997, she was appointed to lead historic Bethel AME Church in San Antonio – the first woman ever assigned to a major AME church in Texas. During the

²⁷ Ibid.

period she served in Texas, Reverend Davis continued to be active in both church and community endeavors. Some of her involvements included serving on the World Methodist Council, as Chair of the African Methodist Episcopal Board of Examiners for the state of Texas, on the General Board of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and on the Board of Trustees for the Houston Graduate School of Theology.

Bishop Sarah Frances Davis was elected and consecrated the one hundred twenty-sixth bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in July 2004. Her first assignment was to the Eighteenth District in southern Africa, which encompasses Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Mozambique. She is committed to continuing the work begun by her predecessor as well as those programs she has developed for her District, and has outlined an ambitious program of community and church growth since taking office in 2004. The Eighteenth District is growing rapidly, with more than twelve thousand members in its one hundred ninety-two churches; more than three thousand students attending thirty-seven schools, and one hundred sixty-eight missionary societies with over four thousand members. Bishop Davis' ministry includes a variety of services both in and outside of the church.

As presiding prelate of the Eighteenth Episcopal District, Bishop Davis believes her mission is to empower the people and transform minds. To this end, she has continued the mission of training started during her years in ministry in Texas. The various programs by which she hopes to accomplish this include training programs for clergy, increased opportunity for Bible study in local churches, and economic

development, in addition to continued development of HIV/AIDS awareness programs.

In every country in the District except Botswana, education beyond primary school is not free, and finances have prevented many clergy from completing much education.

Currently, the Eighteenth District is investigating the feasibility of opening a Theological Institute for the training of ministers. Christian Education, in the form of expanded Bible study in local churches, is also being stressed. The churches in Bishop Davis' district continue to develop projects through which the people can become more self-sufficient as well as develop entrepreneurial opportunities. Bishop Davis is continuing the work begun by her predecessor in serving the needs of orphaned children; in addition to three homes in Swaziland and a day center in Botswana that are already in operation, construction of a center is underway in Mokhotlong, Lesotho and plans have been made for the purchase of land to build an orphanage in Mozambique.

Because there are few women pastors in Southern Africa, Bishop Davis has not had the opportunity to appoint female presiding elders to any of the three vacancies that have arisen since she took office. She did, however, find that the best person to head the leading church in Maseru proved to be a woman. In addition, the Director of Christian Education of one of the Northeast Annual Conferences is a woman. Insofar as a special emphasis on the selection of women, Bishop Davis stresses that the most important consideration is finding the best person to serve where needed. Her personal goal is to be a model of excellence, to:

walk in integrity for them to see; to stress unity and ministry regardless [of] gender; to be available to the women to answer their questions;

to give counsel and to offer hope for those who think their dreams are impossible.²⁸

Furthermore, she believes, she has been called by God to be His minister, "to model servanthood; to live in obedience to the will of God, and to walk in faith in God." As far as the future of women in the church, Bishop Davis believes all things will happen as God wills; because God is no respecter of persons, the gender of His servants is not what is important. Bishop Davis expects God to "continue to move as He moved in 2000 and in 2004."²⁹ She has not sensed that there is an issue about appointment of women in her district. Few women enter ministry, and according to Davis, "those who are trained and have given themselves to ministry are in substantial churches and are recognized as leaders in the District."³⁰ Her focus is on filling each job with the most qualified person, while simultaneously striving to have all members of the church represented at all levels of church participation and leadership.

Bishop Davis spent the first two years of her appointment traveling the district in order to get to know the work that had been done and that still needed doing, to learn to know the people, and to understand the particular aspects of leadership under her stewardship. She expressed appreciation for the work of her predecessor, Bishop Vashti McKenzie, who she said laid a strong foundation for her current work in the district. Thus, in a region not known to be particularly friendly to women, she has found

²⁸ Follow-up to Interview; E-mail, July 14, 2006.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

acceptance as the second woman bishop assigned here. "I was blessed to come behind Bishop Vashti McKenzie, who was the first woman Bishop in the District where I now serve," she said.³¹

Before her election to the episcopacy, Davis was involved in many aspects of service within the connection. She held membership on denominational, ecumenical and community boards. She was selected the AME representative on the Churches Uniting in Christ Coordinating Council, and a member of the HIV/AIDS Task Force of the U.S. Embassy-Lesotho.

Bishop Davis has a special interest in the area of prayer, and has developed dynamic prayer ministries in every charge where she has served, as well as across the connection. While a pastor, she was appointed Assistant Director of Prayer of the connectional African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1994, named clergy representative to the Tenth District's Core Strategic Planning Committee in 2002, and appointed Dean of the Board of Examiners for the Tenth District in 2003. The bishop's continuing interest is in the development and promotion of prayer ministry within the church. One of the programs she created to accomplish this was an interdenominational Bible Study and Fellowship at her first charge. She also developed a ministers' training and development class for licentiates and local AME churches to which associate pastors of local church were also welcomed, and has served as the connectional prayer support Director for the African Methodist Episcopal Church since 1996. It was Reverend

³¹ Ibid.

Davis who introduced formalized training for state and local prayer directors and initiated the publication of a bi-monthly prayer support newsletter to serve the denomination.

Building upon her abiding interest in Christian Education, Bishop Davis has stressed the need for Bible study in the local churches by modeling it at meetings at the district level.

Teaching and Bible study in the local churches is seen as a top priority.

The most important issue Bishop Davis sees for her tenure as bishop is to serve all the people of all the countries in her District, to be "an advocate for this part of the Connectional Church on and off the Continent."³² A leading priority is to serve the needs of orphans and vulnerable children in her district and to gain respect for the AME Church in Maseru by being an active Head of Church in Lesotho. As part of her work in the Eighteenth District, Bishop Davis' primary goal is to implement the programs she has set for herself as well as to minister and lead in "a more excellent way."

Summary

Carolyn Tyler Guidry was the first woman in the African Methodist Episcopal Church connection to be assigned pastor of a major metropolitan church. In 1989, after twelve years in the ministry, Reverend Tyler Guidry was appointed pastor of Walker Temple AME Church in Los Angeles, California. As one of the major churches of the Los Angeles Episcopal District, Walker Temple is known throughout the connection as an important worship center that often leads the way in social and religious matters. Tyler Guidry was pastor of Walker Temple until her historic appointment as the first

³² Ibid.

female presiding elder in the Southern California Conference. She served as presiding elder until her elevation to bishop in 2004.

Like Bishop Tyler Guidry, Reverend Vashti McKenzie had the distinction of being the first woman in her district to be appointed shepherd over a major metropolitan church. Reverend McKenzie ascended to the pulpit of Payne Memorial AME Church in Baltimore, Maryland in 1990, after completing four years in the ministry and serving two other, much smaller churches. The agenda of the 2004 General conference did not include the election of two women; there were other factors influenced the final action that resulted in both Tyler Guidry and Davis being elected. One possible explanation, according to Bishop Tyler Guidry, was the frenzy of electioneering and strategizing that marked the end of balloting. As the third ballot was being planned, a pact was made that the alliance formed to advance the women candidates would support a ticket with the five top candidates from the second ballot. It was not anticipated that two of the top five candidates on the final ballot would be women. Chapter Five will discuss other possible explanations of these developments.

Findings

This study examines the election of three women to the episcopacy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It begins with the history of the AME Church, considers the roles women have filled within the church and the ways women were limited in their access to leadership roles within the church, and analyzes changes that have occurred in the church to allow a departure from more than two hundred years of church policy.

Finally, it will consider the personal attributes of the three women bishops that enabled them to be elected at this time.

For nearly one and a half centuries, women who desired to answer a call to ministry in the African Methodist Episcopal Church faced a variety of obstacles barring their way. In an era when departure from social expectations was unacceptable, women were forced to sublimate their desire to enter ministry or to find other ways to fulfill that desire that did not flout the conventions of society. Those who chose to confront the social limitations on women in ministry were at odds with society; for some, this extended to actual physical danger and threats on their lives. Some women ignored the demands of social behavior for women and preached anyway when and where they found opportunity. Other women left the AME Church and united with other denominations that allowed them to exercise their gifts. Still others organized independent churches. Eventually, women were granted the right to preach; still later, they gained ordination. For another five decades, though, they were barred from the highest levels of leadership in the church. It was only within the past decade that women were able to surmount all the barriers that had denied them the right to the episcopacy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Women were present at the beginning of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, often lending the bulk of both spiritual and financial support to the fledgling church; up to ninety percent of the founding members of many churches were women. Jackson Carroll writes that when a movement – including a religious movement— is new, both

male and female members participate equally. In those movements that continue to emphasize the importance of the gifts of the spirit, women will retain more access to formal leadership roles. This can be seen in such religious groups as the Quakers, Christian Scientists, and the Shakers. However, as the movements become more involved in what Carroll calls the status systems of society, they adopt the role definitions that society recognizes.³³ Thus it was that in the black church, the gender roles of the larger society were adopted that assign women a lesser status. For black women this meant that even though they made up the majority of members in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, their access to leadership was severely limited. Practice and polity prevented them from taking leadership roles once the church was established.

The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which is the official document governing the church and its members, formally prohibited the ordination of women from the connection's founding in 1816 until 1964.³⁴ Editions of the *Discipline* between 1816 and 1948 state that "in no case shall [women] be ordained to

³³ Carroll, Jackson, Barbara Hargrove and Adair Lummis, *Women of the Cloth: A New Opportunity for the Churches* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983), 22.

³⁴ *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* was adapted from the Methodist *Doctrine* at the founding of the AME denomination. Upon taking membership in the church, every member accepts the Discipline as the final authority on all matters relating to the church. Each church that is a member of the connection also agrees to abide by the rules and laws contained in the *Discipline*. Each General Conference addresses suggestions for revisions and additions to the *Discipline* and, any revisions are published at the conclusion of the General Conference. Thus, a new edition is published every four years, usually in the year following the General Conference. A distinction must be made between admitting women to the status of local deacon or local elder and that of itinerant deacon or elder. A local deacon or elder is authorized to serve only in the church in which she or he is a member. He or she may not have specified duties in ministry at that church. He or she is restricted from performing the sacraments until ordained an itinerant. Only after attaining the status of itinerant deacon can a person be

any office in the ministry.”³⁵ Later editions contain slightly different wording that reflects the change allowing women to be licensed to preach, but still denied ordination: “He [The Bishop] shall not ordain any woman to the order of Deacon or Elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.”³⁶ By 1948, women had gained some rights to participation in the conference system, including ordination as deacons, but the prohibition against ordination as elder stood: “He [The Bishop] shall not ordain any woman to the order or [sic] Elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.”³⁷ The distinction was made between admitting women to the status of local deacons and allowing them access to the itinerancy, in which they could be assigned as head pastor to a church. The *Discipline and Doctrine* of 1956 clarified this distinction. Regarding membership, the document states that “all persons over 21 years of age” were to be recognized as full members of the church with all due privileges such as the right to hold office and to vote. But insofar as ordination for women was concerned, “He [the Bishop]

fully ordained as an itinerant elder. And only itinerant elders may be assigned to a church as head pastor or perform the sacraments.

³⁵ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Published by Order of the General Conference Held in Chicago, Illinois, May 1904 by Reverend J. H. Collet, D.D. Compiled by Benjamin F. Lee, et al. 23rd Revised Edition, (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1905); *The Doctrine and Discipline of The African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Published by Order of The General Conference Held in New York City, New York, May, 1936 by Reverend G. E. Curry, Manager of the Book Concern. Compiled by Bishop Fountain, et al. 31st Revised Edition 1936. (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern). This wording remained consistent in the Disciplines published between 1904 and 1936.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Women could be ordained deacon but not elder. A deacon, also called a local deacon, may serve only in the local church from which he or she was ordained. An elder, also called an itinerant elder, is not permanently assigned to one church, but each year receives a new assignment, which may or may not be to the same church he or she serves at the time.

shall not ordain any woman to the order of itinerant Deacon or Elder.”³⁸ It was not until the 1964 edition that language restricting the ordination of women was completely removed from the Discipline.³⁹

After the prohibition denying ordination to women was removed, the struggle continued for access to the highest level of episcopal leadership, the bishopric. Although not expressly forbidden by the Discipline, the long history and tradition of the black church worked to keep women out of the leadership of the church. Access to the bishopric continued to be denied women until the General Conference of 2000. The *Discipline* specifies that persons eligible for ordination as itinerants were also eligible for Episcopal office. With the removal of language denying ordination of women as Itinerant Deacons and Elders, this language was removed as well. However, tradition and practice continued to keep women out of the bishopric despite the continued presence of women in every General Conference election since 1964. The historic selection of Vashti McKenzie at the General Conference of 2000 finally broke this remaining barrier.

A variety of factors has served to enable the advancement of women into the clergy and leadership of the church. Their effort has been enhanced, first, by their tradition of hard work in support of the church. As Jualynn Dodson expressed it, “If it weren’t for the women,” the black church might well not even exist. It would certainly not exist in its present form. Second, despite the traditional injunctions against women

³⁸ Discipline, *Ibid.*, 1957.

³⁹ *The Book of Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Published by the Order of the General Conference Held in Cincinnati, Ohio May, 1964. Edited and Approved by the Compilation Committee, Sherman L. Green, et al, 1965. (Nashville, TN: The AME Sunday School Union).

being placed in positions of authority over men,⁴⁰ they were able to use alternate means to circumvent the intended limitations, moving into place as prayer leaders, exhorters, and teachers. Working through women's organizations, the Sunday Church School, lay organizations, and as stewardesses and deaconesses, women were able to develop leadership skills that expanded their roles in the church. Taking the proffered positions as teachers and other support roles, women developed administrative abilities that enabled them to assume greater kinds and levels of authority in the church.

Women responded to the restrictions on their ministry in a variety of ways that ranged from sublimating their desire to preach into other kinds of service in the church to formally confronting the church in the form of petitions and requests for a change in the official policy. In extreme cases they left the AME Church to form independent churches or to join other denominations. Finally, women prepared themselves for eventual leadership when they entered seminary to seek advanced education.

In 1993, one-third of all seminary students in the United States were women. At Harvard Divinity School, the total female enrollment was sixty percent; at Howard University School of Divinity, forty-two percent; and at Yale, the number was thirty percent.⁴¹ The large numbers of seminary graduates placed greater numbers of women in the position to qualify for appointments in church ministry, but it did not translate to equal numbers of assignments due to the imbalance between available ministers and

⁴⁰ Lincoln, 286.

⁴¹ McKenzie, xvi.

available positions. In fact, less than one half of female graduates received an invitation to pastor a church compared to sixty-six percent of male graduates. Of the forty-one percent of women who did receive an invitation, only nine percent received four or more requests. According to Carpenter, thirteen percent received one request; fifteen percent received two requests, and five percent received three requests. All women who entered seminary did not do so with plans to enter the ministry; with such large numbers of seminary-educated women, however, they were in a much more auspicious position to enter the ministry when the opportunity presented itself.⁴²

Taking all these things into consideration, the journey African Methodist Episcopal women have taken to reach the episcopacy has been a long and arduous one, stretching all the way back to the first decades of the church's existence and encompassing a wealth of issues related to many more concerns beyond simple recognition of their call to preach. Women, so instrumental in the establishment, nourishment and growth of the black church, were shut out by policy and practice when it came to leadership in the church. They slowly built upon the small increments of progress gained by their efforts of over two hundred years. Their faith as well as their strength and perseverance allowed them to continue the journey; they did not falter, did not abandon the struggle, and to a limited extent they finally prevailed. But in the face of

⁴² Delores Carpenter, "A Time for Honor: A Portrait of African American Clergywomen," in *How Long This Road: Race, Religion and the Legacy of C. Eric Lincoln* Alton B. Pollard and Love Henry Welchel, Jr., eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 146.

the ongoing struggle for recognition of their right to preach, then their right to equal access, they had to confront other, more subtle constraints.

Among these constraints are the continuing perception that women in ministry are somehow flouting the natural order of society, and that they are usurping the rightful position of men when they enter into the ministry. Women continue to be seen as ineffectual leaders and administrators, despite much evidence to the contrary. And women are seen as neglecting their proper place as wives and mothers, keepers of the home, while they pursue other interests outside the home. Although women of the African Methodist Episcopal Church finally attained the episcopacy in the year 2000, these underlying issues remain to be overcome.

Although the sentiments of womanist theology can be discerned in women's struggles throughout the history of the AME Church, most women who fought for their place in the church did not necessarily identify with any feminist movement, whether white or womanist. As part of their basic cultural identity, perhaps, black women were more interested in building up the church; they ostensibly did not see their struggle as a means of wresting control away from men, or as a means of evening up the score with men for a share of the power, but rather as a means of making a more meaningful contribution to the strength and life of the black church. Dodson and other scholars have asserted that the goals of black women differed substantially from those of white feminists, and that black women did not see themselves as in competition with the men of the church. They wanted change, but change that would add strength. As womanist

scholars began to write and promote womanist theology in the 1980s, these sentiments were articulated and made plain. Some churchmen were thus enlisted on the side of the women in the debate about inclusion – men such as James Cone, C. Eric Lincoln and others. Delores Williams has written that black women envisioned a better church, and that their efforts were to force the church to live up to its potential, to carve out a space where women in ministry could add their unique contributions to the strength and life of the church. They did not see the church living up to its ideals, so they made an effort to insure that it did. In this respect, the goals and perspectives of black churchwomen and womanist theology are perceived to be less adversarial than that of (white) feminist theology.

Womanist theology cannot be shown to be an integral part of the philosophy of the three women bishops; even so, there is little doubt that it has had an important impact on the development of women's leadership in the black church, including that of these three women. Coupled with women's increased attainment of seminary education, the ideas and concepts presented by womanist theologians and scholars have brought the issue of equality for women to the forefront of the church. Issues are now being discussed in the context of the church that were not mentioned publicly in the past. Many women may have had these thoughts; now they feel free to discuss them, and find that many within the church are in full agreement.

Changes in the larger society no doubt have greatly influenced the development of women's leadership within the church. Women's continued activism and agitation for improvement across all denominations has also had a significant effect on the access to church leadership that many women now experience. Although not always active participants in the feminist theology movement among white women during the sixties and seventies, black women developed a similar movement within their own churches that developed in some cases into what is now known as the womanist theology movement. Women were also able to confront men with the contradictions inherent in the liberation theology movement that continued to show a bias against women even while pressing for an end to the anti-black biases of much of Christianity. All in all, these continued pressures on the church on behalf of women had their effect in all denominations.

Another consideration in assessing the reasons for recent changes in women's access to leadership in the AME Church is the theory of social change, which is not addressed by the literature to any appreciable extent. The socio-political reality of twenty-first century America is that women's roles are continuing to evolve at a rapid pace, as many of the taboos and limitations of earlier eras fall. In 2000, women had already broken through many of the barriers to full participation in diverse areas of social discourse. The church has confronted and sometimes acquiesced to policies and practices unheard of in earlier generations, from the acceptance and advancement of homosexual

clergy to the sanction of homosexual unions by some churches. The inclusion of women in this environment cannot be as much of a radical change as in generations past.

The effect on the black church can be seen in much the same way. Perhaps there was not more of an uproar in 2000 when McKenzie's coalition with the "good-old-boy network" was revealed because this was seen as a political reality. Black churchwomen have long demonstrated that their purpose and intent was not to displace men; their *modus operandi* has always been to form alliances and accept compromises in order to serve the greater good. Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that a female candidate would agree to support her male counterparts in exchange for their support of her candidacy. The person so inclined would not necessarily see herself as "selling out" the other female candidate, but rather securing the possibility that one of them would be successful. This is possibly a position that is diametrically opposed to the mindset of early white feminists. But as stated earlier, the ultimate goal of black clergywomen has been the improvement of the entire people as well as the advancement of women.

This might also explain to some extent why none of the female bishops has made much of an issue of whether they support or ascribe their victory to womanist theology. While McKenzie has referenced womanism in her writing, she dismissed reliance on womanism in discussing her role as a bishop. Like her counterparts, Bishop McKenzie stood by her assertion that to place women at the forefront of consideration in making appointments or advancing certain persons in the ministry based on gender would be unfair. McKenzie stated that she would expect a woman bishop to use the same criteria

as a male, and that she thinks all candidates would want to be considered first on their qualifications, not on their gender. How would it be different from the way women have been treated, she asked, if she were to put women ahead of men based simply on gender? It would not be fair, and, she indicated, she is determined to be seen as fair. Thus far, Bishop McKenzie has not had the opportunity to make any appointments of presiding elders.

Bishop Davis did not attribute the efforts or effects of womanism as having a great effect on her elevation to the episcopacy. In fact, she professes to having no real knowledge of its tenets, and no concern with its application. Davis attributed her success wholly to God, and stated that she can only explain her election as the work of God. Thus far, she has made three appointments as presiding elder, all of whom were male. It is possible, too, that Davis' district, in a region of the world where patriarchy is firmly entrenched, does not see a large number of women enter the ministry or aspire to leadership positions at this time. This topic is one that might bear further study in the future.

Bishop Tyler Guidry, who has always been known as an outspoken advocate of women in ministry, adopts much the same position as the other female bishops in regard to the selection of women for advancement. While she asserts that she will always be mindful of the need to encourage women and to avoid the historical bias regarding their abilities, Bishop Guidry, like her female colleagues, asserted that advancement must and will always be based on qualifications and not gender. It has been suggested that such

pronouncements are entirely expected and understandable in the political climate of today. It has also been suggested that such pronouncements might be a result of the women's lack of enthusiasm for competition from other women. It is doubtful that the latter explanation is valid.

An investigation of the appointments made by each woman since her election serves to reinforce the idea that none of the bishops has singled out women for exclusive attention and advancement. Bishop Davis' three appointments of presiding elders were all male. Bishop Tyler Guidry's appointments have included one male, and Bishop McKenzie has not made any appointments.

The increase in the number of women entering seminary and ultimately the ministry also reflects a changing social attitude towards the role of women in society. Carroll, et al state in *Women of the Cloth* that as women continue to enter what has heretofore been considered "men's professions," social and cultural shifts occur which impact the public's perception about what is "appropriate" for women.⁴³ Another consideration the authors propose is the idea that modern professionalism has made it easier for women to enter previously off-limit professions. In today's society, the stress is on achievement and qualifications rather than such characteristics as gender or social class. The person who has the ability to get a job done is viewed as deserving of the opportunity to take the job; the old stereotypes that limited access for women have gone the way of many other limitations, such as those based on race or culture. Of course,

⁴³ Carroll, 8.

these perceptions have not completely disappeared, just as racism has not been totally eradicated from American society; but the ideas are no longer accepted as the status quo in much the same way that overt racial discrimination is no longer accepted. At one time, society accepted the idea that there was such a thing as woman's place. A woman who endeavored to enter what was considered a man's place was viewed with scorn and suspicion by both men and women. But like many other areas of life, these barriers began to fall in the wake of the Second World War. During that period, women were welcomed into non-traditional professions to make up for the men who were away at war. After the war, many women did not choose to go back to the way things were. In the ensuing decades, especially during the era of the Sixties, women continued to move into formerly off-limits areas of work and endeavor. Carroll cites increases in the number of women in such professions as the law and medicine in the multiple hundreds—a 574% increase in women doctors; nearly a 2,000% increase in women lawyers; likewise, in the clergy, an increase of over 240% occurred. The Civil Rights advances of the 1960s carried certain benefits for women, as well. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination based on gender. This act had as much effect on women's access to increased opportunities as the provisions dealing with racial discrimination had on the situation of African Americans and other "minorities." Among other things, college education figures for women continued to increase. This trend continued into the

1970s and 1980s. While male enrollment in seminary increased by about 25% between 1972 and 1980, the number of women students rose by 340%.⁴⁴

The women who flew in the face of tradition in striving to be preachers knew they set themselves a difficult task. It is to their credit that they believed it a possible dream. When Jarena Lee attempted to follow her call in 1809, she began the long series of events that would culminate with the election of Vashti McKenzie at the General Conference of 2000. In the intervening years between Lee and McKenzie were women who were determined to take their place at the head of their church, not just in the pews. The election of Vashti Murphy McKenzie, Carolyn Tyler Guidry, and Sarah Frances Davis came about due to a variety of factors both within and without the church— changes that encompass a wide range of social and political developments impacting church and society as related to the role of women in leadership in the American culture.

Delores Williams and Jualynne Dodson assert that these changes came about due primarily to the persistent efforts of churchwomen and a refusal to accept the status quo. Church officials, including Dr. Jamye Coleman Williams, retired General officer of the AME Church, concur with Dodson in their belief that this occurrence was the culmination of decades of concerted effort by women, and not a deliberate act by the male leadership of the church. On the contrary, Dr. Williams believes a confluence of events converged at an opportune time to cause a result that was not wholly expected, nor even particularly desired, by the church hierarchy.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 3.

The female bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, despite very different personal styles and personalities, possess several similarities that may help to account for their success in what has traditionally been a patriarchal system. All three women fit the contemporary model of women in ministry who are fully prepared academically. Tyler Guidry endured both overt and covert opposition and obstruction to complete four years of ministerial education at the Los Angeles Bible School. Tyler Guidry entered bible school at a time when few women in the black church were doing so; she relates that she was constantly reminded of this fact by her instructors, and some went so far as to tell her that she did not belong in Bible school. In one instance, she was prevented from completing a course needed for graduation by a new policy clearly aimed at her as a woman. Despite these discouragements, she completed undergraduate studies and went on to earn a Master of Divinity degree. Davis and McKenzie hold both a Master of Divinity and a Doctor of Ministry. Entering seminary studies in a later era, they did not encounter the same degree of resistance as Tyler Guidry. These women reflect the contemporary tendency of women aspirants to ministry to attend seminary.

All three women come from families that were active in the church, and were raised in such a manner, although not all were raised in the African Methodist Episcopal tradition. Carolyn Tyler Guidry's grandmother was a founder of the Bonner Institutional African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first AME church in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. In such an environment, it was expected that she would be active in the church, and that as a youth that she would participate in all the leadership training

opportunities afforded by the church. Although they were raised in other denominations as children, both Davis and McKenzie were active in the church as children and youth. All were trained in leadership as youth leaders of their respective churches, and all three women held leadership positions from an early age within the church. Their leadership and activism extended to community organizations as well.

The women bishops all state that they experienced a distinct sense of a calling by God at an early age, although they did not heed this call until they were older. All three women are of a generation that did not routinely accept the calling of women into ministry, which caused them to hesitate to accept the call. Each woman recalls that she underwent a period of questioning her calling and of "bargaining" with God to take someone else. Eventually, however, each recognized the call as legitimately coming from God, and acquiesced by accepting the call on her life.

Bishop Tyler Guidry was born into the African Methodist Episcopal Church; both Bishop Sarah Davis and Bishop Vashti McKenzie united with the African Methodist Episcopal Church during their young adulthood before accepting the call, and were consequently trained and ordained into that denomination.

Sarah Frances Davis, elected bishop in 2004, was also a relatively new pastor when she gained the highest office in the AME Church. Bishop Davis does not profess to understand the reason she was successful at this time when so many women have failed to achieve the episcopacy. She acknowledges that she is not an activist or a womanist, and that she does not think she has done anything in particular to achieve her goal.

Ordained an elder in 1992, she was consecrated the 126th bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and its third female bishop only twelve years later. Reverend Davis has pastored two other churches – the Sealey Circuit as her first charge in 1992, and historic Bethel AME San Antonio – a major church—as her second charge in 1997. She, too, moved rapidly through the ranks to reach the episcopacy.

It is significant that each of the three women had proved sufficiently capable that she achieved assignment to a major church within a few years of ordination. There are scores of well-regarded and prominent male preachers in the AME Church who have not experienced such rapid advancement within the church. It has been suggested that the agenda of the General Conference in 2004 did not include the election of two women. Reverend Carolyn Tyler Guidry was a virtual certainty, due to her status as the candidate who had been left at the door, or narrowly defeated, in the 2000 election. But it would appear that other factors influenced the outcome of the 2004 election. Bishop Tyler Guidry suggests that one possible explanation might be the frenzy of election engineering in the final sessions before the vote. As alliances and coalitions were formed to support the various candidates, she said, an agreement was forged that the top five candidates on the second ballot would be supported by the alliance for Reverend Guidry. It came as a great surprise to many in attendance that two of the top five candidates on that ballot were women. But they were the beneficiaries of the alliance pact, and thus two women were swept into office.

The ministries of McKenzie, Tyler Guidry, and Davis are very similar, being most inclined to the social ministry model. According to Lincoln and Mamiya's dialectical models, all three ministries contain aspects of several paradigms while falling fully within none to the exclusion of the others. According to the dialectical model of priestly versus prophetic, some aspects of both can be discerned. In each of the three ministries, involvement with the political concerns and activities in the wider community is an integral part of the ministry. Simultaneously, all of the women conducted a ministry in which they were intensely committed to development of the spiritual life of their church members. Thus, the women are variously described as being closely involved in the political as well as the social life of the communities in which they served.

The second dialectic model, communal versus privatistic, indicates that the churches are definitely involved in all aspects of members' lives. In nearly every instance, the ministers were assigned to churches that were in a declining state, which needed immediate attention and ministry to re-invigorate the members. Even those church assignments that could be considered to major churches were to churches and congregations in decline. Thus, the pastors became actively involved in the political, economic, educational and social lives of the church members.

The charismatic versus bureaucratic dialectic applies to all three subjects. Unlike some of the other denominations in the black church tradition, the African Methodist Episcopal Church is what is called a reporting church; the purpose of the various

conferences is to maintain an accounting of every aspect of church life and leadership from membership to active ministries to financial reporting. Members of the African Methodist Episcopal Connection are assessed a financial apportionment for support of the church leaders and the overall work of the church connection, based on membership. Thus, accurate records are kept of members joining, leaving, births, deaths, weddings, etc. Churches are not independent, and the *Discipline and Doctrine* dictates every aspect of church governance from the manner of accepting new members to the procedure for filing a grievance by any individual member of the church. Charismatic aspects of church leadership sometimes play a vital role in the growth and sustenance of the church. As Vashti McKenzie noted, she was able to grow the churches on the eastern shore of Maryland because the community became interested in her as a preacher. Her preaching with passion is what brought members, and what kept many of them coming back. Likewise, both Tyler Guidry and Davis have been described as exceptional preachers. Although believers will often join a major church that has an ineffectual preacher, or remain at a church whose minister is not a great speaker, churches usually do not grow at a significant rate and sometimes lose a significant number of members if the preaching is not appealing.

The dialectic of resistance versus accommodation has played and continues to play a significant role in the life of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. African Methodism was born out of protest against the discrimination and prejudice black believers suffered at the hands of white Christians. Inclusiveness and antidiscrimination

have been hallmarks of the creed of the African Methodist Episcopal Church since its founding. In some respects, this creed may help to explain the rise of women into leadership in the church. One of the strongest criticisms of the church's position on and treatment of women has been the contradiction of a church founded in protest of discrimination based on race which itself is practicing discrimination based on gender.

Early in its life, the African Methodist Episcopal Church also dealt with the dialectic of accommodation, with the decision of some members to organize independently of the AME organization. This group was originally the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME), and is now known as the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The church originated in 1870, when some black members left the white Methodist Episcopal Church for many of the same reasons the AMEs separated from St. George's Episcopal Church earlier in the century. However, uncomfortable with what they perceived as excessive militancy in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the group opted to form a separate denomination rather than join with the AME Church, and to use the appellation "Colored" rather than "African." They felt that the emphasis of the AME church on the "African" in its name was not only inflammatory, but that it also served to make other races feel unwelcome. Still later, in 1954, the name was changed from "Colored" to "Christian" to emphasize the universality of the church and de-

emphasize racial identification. Since that time, several attempts have been made to unite these two black churches, but to no avail.⁴⁵

Other factors that are similar in the ministries of these three women include their appointment to a major church early in their career. Tyler Guidry was the first woman in the African Methodist Episcopal connection to be appointed to a major metropolitan church; her leadership of her first two churches was deemed exemplary enough to warrant this important assignment. A year later, Vashti McKenzie was sent to historic Payne Memorial African Methodist Episcopal in Baltimore, Maryland. Although a smaller church at 300 members, Payne was also considered a major church, having been founded more than one hundred years previously. Again, Reverend McKenzie had shown remarkable preaching and administrative skills in her previous pastoral assignments; the choice was validated by the rapid growth of Payne AME under her leadership. Reverend Sarah Davis was honored with an appointment to historic Bethel African Methodist Episcopal in San Antonio, Texas in 1997, again a testament to the skills and talents she had exhibited as a pastor in her previous two churches. All three women were relatively new in ministry—Tyler Guidry had been a pastor since 1977, and had pastored two churches before being assigned to Walker Temple in 1989. McKenzie was ordained in 1986, and assigned to her third charge, Payne Memorial, in 1990. Sarah Davis was at her second charge, having been in ministry since 1992—only five years—

⁴⁵ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 60-62.

when she came to Bethel San Antonio. Something in the way these women served their ministries made such rapid progress possible. The women all aver that the "something" that happened on their way to the episcopacy was God. When asked about her election in 2000, Bishop McKenzie replied, "God always shows up at General Conference."⁴⁶

Bishop Davis asserts that she could not have been elected at this time if God had not placed her in the episcopacy. And Bishop Tyler Guidry, although disappointed that she was not successful in her 2000 bid for the bishopric, speaks of what she terms God's will and God's plan. She, like her colleagues, believes events unfolded in the fullness of God's time. While the possibility of a divine hand in these elections cannot be discounted, one can nevertheless ascribe a variety of reasons to the occurrence.

With respect to the role the bishops see for themselves as women in the episcopacy, the bishops all assert that they do not feel any particular pressure or obligation to use their position to place more women in leadership roles in the church. Each woman stresses that it is important to be fair, to use the same standards of qualifications in placing women that they would use in placing men. Each says there will be no problem finding qualified women, and that above all they must maintain a sense of fairness in order to serve all the people of their districts, not just the women. One reason for the relative conservatism of the women once they have assumed office may be that they have had a chance to see firsthand what needs to be done in order to facilitate changes that benefit women in the church. It could be counterproductive for the women

⁴⁶ McKenzie Interview.

bishops to assume a more militant stance from the outset, declaring their intention to bypass men for the benefit of women. It makes more sense for them to assess the situation first and gradually initiate whatever changes they believe will best serve the purpose of women's inclusion. Concisely put, it might also be politically unwise to do so. Each agrees, however, that they occupy a very significant role as an exemplar for other women, and especially for young women of the church. It is important to note a commonality among all the women bishops: each has stated that one reason she did not initially heed the call God placed on her life was because she had no precedent for believing a woman should and could be a minister. Each is therefore very cognizant of her responsibility in serving in a position to serve as such a precedent for other young women.

Additional factors that helped to place Vashti McKenzie, Carolyn Tyler Guidry and Sarah Frances Davis in the episcopacy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church might include continued lobbying and agitation by the women of the church through the entire history of the denomination, first to ascend to ordained ministry and then to leadership. Additionally, none hesitated to credit the men who have remained their staunch supporters in the struggle – men like Bishops Vinton Anderson and John Bryant, who broke tradition when they appointed women as presiding elders; Bishop Frank Cumming, who spoke publicly in the Episcopal Address at the General Conference of 1996 in support of a resolution to elect a woman bishop; those bishops who appointed women to major churches in the connection; Reverend Floyd Flake, who stood to present

Dr. Jamye Coleman Williams' resolution to the General Conference; and Bishop Harrison Bryant, who continued to encourage his female students to persevere in their quest to preach and to lead.

Facing the three-pronged threat of racism, sexism, and classism, black women have had to forge a different sort of alliance with whoever was willing in order to achieve a measure of success. They have found little usefulness in the postures and tenets of feminist theology as practiced by white American women. Even when black women joined the feminists, the underlying social and political issues of racism and classism remained to confound their efforts. This reality is possibly reflected in the fact that much of feminist theological study does not ordinarily address the black church. The conflict between the concerns of white and black feminists continues to be one that causes more distance than unity.

In light of the historical patriarchal bias of the black church, it is expected that the women bishops will bring a new sensibility to the church. Despite the women bishops' protestations to the contrary, one can only anticipate that a new spirit and atmosphere will prevail in the church as more women ascend to the episcopacy—an atmosphere that will herald a wider acceptance and sensitivity to the unique talents women bring to ministry—simply because of the presence of more women in leadership.

Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry asserts much the same-- that the mere presence of women in the leadership of the church will give comfort and assurance to young women that such an accomplishment is also within their grasp. The women bishops do not

appear to see themselves in the role of firebrands who will take up a concerted fight for women; indeed, as Dr. Dennis Dickerson states, the demands of the position leave little time for strictly womanist activism. Speaking of his work in Brazil with Bishop Carolyn Tyler Guidry, he said, "Once elected, they are bishops I saw nothing . . . in terms of her doing her job that was 'female.' Nor would it have been 'male' if she was a different gender."⁴⁷ There will likely be a heightened sensitivity on the part of the women bishops to the talents and skills of women and more willingness to appoint women than some men might exhibit, but as far as a preoccupation with the placement of women, Dickerson suggests that the demands of the job of bishop leave no room for such a consideration.

If, as is widely believed, women bring an increased sense of spirituality to the church, this spirit may help to reinvigorate the church at a time when new strength is sorely needed. One area of concern in the church is its lack of appeal to the new generation of youth. A more nurturing and democratic approach to pastoral leadership may bring back some of the disaffected members of younger generations. Dr. Henry Whelchel, former chair of the Religion and Philosophy Department at Clark Atlanta University and now Professor of Church History at the Interdenominational Theological Center, believes the perception that women are agents of spiritual renewal and restoration to a greater extent than are men is a positive attribute in their favor, and that this perception can enhance women's access to leadership to a significant degree. To the extent that women leaders do focus on spirituality, personal salvation, and restoration, the

⁴⁷ Dennis C. Dickerson, Interview by author, tape recording, Nashville, TN, August 9, 2006.

church would serve its own best interests to continue to afford them the opportunity to advance to leadership.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

While the literature on the history, development and impact of feminist theology is plentiful, relatively few studies have examined the genesis and influence of womanist theology in the black church. The literature on the role of women in the black church is somewhat more available; however, investigations of women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church are even more sparse. This study serves as a beginning in the redress of that lack. The research investigates the history of women's participation in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the myriad ways women addressed the historical restrictions placed upon their full participation in the church as part of its leadership. This struggle is as old as the AME denomination itself, having begun with the founding of the denomination and continuing even as women begin to break through the barriers and take their place in leadership along with men. In some respects, it supercedes the initiation of any formal, concerted civil rights movement in the United States; however, it is just as significant in that women's activism in the church represented a similar effort to gain equal recognition and access for a significant portion of the population.

The study was undertaken to examine the paths of the three women elected bishop in the AME Church at the General Conferences of 2000 and 2004. The emphasis of the

study is the role women have traditionally played in the black church in general and the AME Church in particular; the origins of the AME Church and women's place in its founding; the ways in which women have contributed to and participated in the growth of the AME Church; and finally, the personal talents and abilities that enabled these three women to ascend to the highest levels of leadership in a church that historically denied women such access.

Through perseverance and determination, women have made substantial incursions into the traditionally male-dominated church in the United States, in both European-American and African-American denominations. This progress is remarkable for the fact, among others, that it has been accomplished without a great deal of fanfare or disruption of society or the church. The election of Vashti Murphy McKenzie in 2000, and Carolyn Tyler Guidry and Sarah Frances Davis in 2004 were remarkable events, but they occurred in a relatively tranquil atmosphere. While it is true that some black church denominations continue to deny women equal access, and that women in many cases have protested these limitations by various means, society has not seen a significant amount of acrimony and disruption of the black church in the process of adapting to women's changing roles. In some respects, the changes in the Christian church overall can be attributed to social changes that have resulted in women's greater acceptance and access to roles traditionally reserved for men. In all areas of life, women are moving into places where their presence was not only not welcome, but often expressly forbidden.

The research found a variety of traditional policies that restricted women's role in the church; the research also discusses the many ways women have historically circumvented those restrictions. The African Methodist Episcopal Church introduced an official written doctrine barring women from ordination very soon after its organization. Although some women served as preachers and in other roles of teaching within the church, from the founding of the connectional church in 1816, the understanding was that men should and would lead the church. Despite the presence of women at the founding of the church, and the invaluable assistance of women in establishing, developing and supporting the church, male dominance was accepted and encouraged through most of two centuries. This policy changed only gradually and through hard work by men and women of the church over the course of more than two hundred years. The research has not been conclusive in determining the catalysts for women's advancement. While it is true that women have made incremental advances during the past two centuries, from gaining the right to preach in public to the recognition by the church of their right to do so; from installation as deaconesses and stewardesses to official ordination; and finally, to the right to declare for and to win the episcopacy, there is little indication that these changes were promoted or embraced by the majority of the male leaders of the church, or indeed the majority of church members; the most significant catalyst for the changes wrought in the church has been the activism and the endurance of women's insistence on equal status for more than two hundred years.

Women's encounters with the male hierarchy of the church can be successfully likened to the struggle by African-Americans for equal rights in this country. The rights

of African-Americans to enjoy the benefits of citizenship and equality under the law were granted grudgingly and sparingly over a period of several centuries. So, too, has the status of women been upgraded in the Christian Church over decades and centuries, and often in the same manner and for the same reasons. For example, an early tactic used successfully by African-Americans in their quest for political and social equality in the United States was the economic boycott. Female members of the early church have used a similar tactic, leveraging their financial clout to sway male members to their way of thinking. Later, the courts were used to force acceptance and observance of the law of the land. Even today, when some African-American scholars question that the founders of this country ever intended the freedom and equality of which they so eloquently wrote and spoke should be extended to other than wealthy white male land owners, they concede that the force of ethics and morality as well as the force of law has been used to guarantee many of the rights black Americans might otherwise have to forfeit.

In much the same way, female activists and womanists have appealed to the ethical foundations of the church to gain support for their position. Women have successfully used the fact that the black church was founded in large part on the struggle for equal rights for African-Americans to bolster their call for equality. They have argued successfully that it is both hypocritical and morally suspect for the AME Church, founded in protest of racial bigotry and discrimination, to practice gender bias and deny equal rights to more than half its membership. It seems a certainty that many men in the church – as well as a good number of women—continue to hold fast to the Pauline interpretation of women's place in the church. With this reality in mind, it would appear

that acceptance of women in ministry has come not entirely because of a belief in the cause of women's equality, but more likely because even those who disagree have been swept up in the tide of public and social change that has also affected the church.

A womanist writer who concurs with this idea, Delores Carpenter, has discussed the problematic issue of a scriptural interpretation in which society has been indoctrinated to envision God as a male figure. Despite the recent trend toward gender-neutral language in church literature and documents, this issue has remained of concern to womanist scholars, reflecting as it does an androcentric social predilection that shows no sign of abating. Envisioning the God-figure as male has "systematically programmed" both men and women to think in certain ways about women in the pulpit; for generations, the traditional teaching has been that men should be the head of the church as well as the home. God is called the Father, the Lord, referred to by the pronouns He and Him, and all imaginings of the God-figure entail the masculine gender.¹ The resulting unconscious indoctrination of society has proven very deep-rooted and difficult to counter. Further, society has been systematically programmed to think certain ways about women in the pulpit. Therefore, it will be necessary – and take a certain amount of time – for society to unlearn these perceptions. The truth of Carpenter's assertion lies in the fact that among the detractors of women as episcopal leaders are many women – including ministers—who have succumbed to the traditional teaching that men should be the head of home and

¹Delores Carpenter, "A Time for Honor: A Portrait of African-American Clergywomen" in *How Long This Road: Race, Religion, and the Legacy of C. Eric Lincoln* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 141.

church. Changing that attitude will help to bring about the social changes in the black church that will signal more acceptance for women at all levels of ministry.

The fact that women make up the majority of members in most black churches also has the potential for advocacy of clergywomen's equal status. Because women control such a large proportion of the church budget, they are in a position to translate that strength into action on behalf of women in ministry. The necessity, of course, is the mobilization of that potential by women aware of and committed to the resolution of the problem. Additionally, churchwomen would need to move into more positions of leadership within their churches to wield any real power and authority to make needed changes. This would entail a conscious and concerted effort to place more women in leadership positions of the local church, such as trustees, stewards, and other officers of the church. Generally speaking, even when the membership of a church is overwhelmingly female, the majority of these positions are filled with men.

The author has personally experienced an instance when a pastor chose male leadership even when a woman was more qualified. The Superintendent of Sunday School resigned, and his assistant, Mr. Jones, was appointed Superintendent despite a history of unreliability.² The researcher was appointed Assistant Superintendent, with the admonition to help Mr. Jones as much as possible, acknowledging that he was not very efficient or dependable-- to work closely with Mr. Jones in order to be sure things were done correctly. The retiring superintendent later informed the researcher that he had recommended her appointment, but that the pastor wanted to keep a man in the job. This church had never had a female Superintendent of Sunday School, and the minister was

² For the sake of confidentiality, the Superintendent shall be called "Mr. Jones."

apparently not willing to break tradition and appoint one. Even after the researcher resigned the post, Mr. Jones' wife continued to request her assistance with the business of the Sunday School, reminding the researcher that Mr. Jones was having problems running things and could use some help.

The journey women have undertaken to reach the episcopacy in the African Methodist Episcopal Church has been long and arduous, spanning a time period from the first decade of the church's existence to the present. The women who challenged tradition knew they set themselves a difficult task. It is to their credit that they did not believe it to be an impossible one. Resistance to the limitations imposed on the women who were so instrumental in the establishment, nourishment, and growth of the church begins in the official record with Jarena Lee. When Jarena Lee led the charge in 1809 by requesting a license to preach from Richard Allen, she began the long series of events that would culminate in the election of Vashti McKenzie at the General Conference of 2000. In the intervening years between Jarena Lee and Vashti McKenzie was a host of women who were determined to take their place in the leadership of their church.

Women who felt a call to enter ministry took various and sundry avenues to fulfillment of that desire. Where they could not preach, they taught or led prayer meetings. Where they needed more elucidation of scripture, they sought education. In contemporary times, this desire has translated to women entering seminary and graduate theological studies in record numbers, often surpassing the numbers of men enrolled in higher education. The decision to seek further scriptural understanding through graduate theological studies had an unintended benefit -- it not only helped women to elucidate the

essential truths that "the scriptures . . . were written to particular situations and were not intended to be universally applied against all women for all time, everywhere," but also made them better prepared to serve God's people in whatever capacity they selected.³ As women came to this understanding, they were better equipped to confront the social perception of the ministry as a male preserve. Therefore, although many women did not initially seek seminary educations as a means of entering the clergy, the marked increase in the numbers of women attending seminary helped them both to envision themselves in new ways unanticipated by the church or society, and prepared them for eventual service.⁴ When women did decide to seek positions as ordained clergy, they already had the educational credentials and qualifications.⁵ Carpenter writes that social change in the black church must be supported at its foundation by accepting a new interpretive stance toward scripture that incorporates the tenets of womanist theology. Successful resolution of these perceptions would appear to be vital in order for the social perception of the clergy to change.

Another area that remains of serious concern for women seeking to enter the clergy is that of comparative assignments. In Carpenter's 1999 study of male and female

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid; See also Frazier and Grant for more on the idea that sexist interpretation of the Bible has allowed men to restrain women's role in the church. The author disagrees to some extent with some of the conclusions drawn by these authors. If one accepts the Scriptures as God-inspired, the matter of incorrect or repressive interpretation must rest solely on the responsibility of the humans who do so. Throughout history, humans have used the Bible to justify all manner of behavior, from the enslavement of Africans and the destruction of diverse civilizations around the world to this, the subjugation of women in the church. If one accepts that these uses and interpretations are incorrect, it should not be difficult to envision that scriptural interpretations that limit women are also human and not divine interpretations and thus subject to error. Those scholars who would reject scripture, in part or whole, due to this perception of error, would also be presumed to be in error.

seminary graduates, only twenty-one percent of women graduates held a full-time position as a pastor. Coupled with the tendency to assign women to smaller, less affluent churches, the trend has been that women simply are not able to support themselves and their families through employment in the ministry.⁶ Even if they want to accept such a position, it is sometimes not feasible to do so. Or, accepting such a position may mean the necessity to work a second job just in order to earn an adequate income. Added to this, the fact that the typical woman minister is a single parent of two children means that the lack of adequate employment compensation is another barrier to more women entering ministry. As in the general population, women pastors earn less than their male counterparts. Since their churches tend to be smaller, and they are advanced less frequently, the tendency is for women to remain in low-paying positions. When they do move, it is most often laterally, to similar appointments rather than to more prestigious – and wealthier – assignments.⁷ The expectation also seems to be that a woman pastor will assume a host of unpaid volunteer work that would not be asked of a male pastor. Thus, she bears major responsibility and leadership but receives no remuneration, while simultaneously having to handle duties to her family. In cases where she must hold down a second job in order to earn sufficient income, these extra duties add yet another burden to her situation. Carpenter writes:

Often, a clergywoman's second job is church-related, not her first. Although most of the studies of clergywomen completed in the last decade focus primarily on white women, some of the figures [for example, Howard University] can also be applied to African-American clergywomen. In

⁶ Carpenter, 4.

⁷ Lincoln, 299.

smaller churches, only the pastor receives a salary. Ministers appointed as associates usually must maintain a secular job in order to support themselves and their families. In the smallest churches, the pastor in charge may not receive a salary at all.⁸

Despite these inherent problems, however, Carpenter believes that women's advancement is assured because of certain characteristics clergywomen seem to possess. Hard work is paramount, coupled with an understanding that scripture has been slanted toward male privilege by man, not God. Thus, they may have the task of countering that bias, but with the help of the Spirit, they harbor no doubts of their ability to do so.⁹ Even though the past decade has seen significant achievements for women in ministry, Carpenter believes the best formula for success would be grounded in a deliberate, affirmative action-type of program that would provide access to more women.

The first woman to gain official recognition by the African Methodist Episcopal Church after Jarena Lee was Sarah Hughes, who was ordained by Bishop Henry McNeal Turner in 1885. Nearly seven decades had elapsed between the ordination of Hughes and the year Lee was granted status as an exhorter. Her success was short-lived, however, as the ordination was rescinded two years later by Bishop Jabez P. Campbell. The General Conference of 1888 upheld Campbell's action. The church did, however, sanction women as evangelists at that same Conference.

The legal challenge to women's exclusion from ordination was not initiated until forty-eight years later, when Martha Jane Keyes, a pastor and evangelist from Kentucky, introduced a bill at the General Conference of 1936 to authorize the ordination of women.

⁸ Carpenter, 6.

⁹ Ibid., 141.

After another twelve years, in 1948, the Conference yielded and authorized women's ordination as local deacons; in 1956, ordination of women as local elders was authorized. The offices of itinerant deacon and itinerant elder were opened to women at the General Conference of 1960. From that time forward, women intensified their assault upon the last bastion of resistance— that of the office of bishop.

Between 1964 and 2000, five women entered the official campaign for election to the episcopacy. Recognizing that their candidacies would not initially be successful, they nevertheless believed they were laying a foundation that would ultimately bring about the change they desired. Carrie Thomas Hooper, a New York pastor, was the first official female candidate in 1964. She received eleven votes on the first ballot. In every succeeding election, there was at least one woman candidate. They were Carrie Thomas Hooper, in 1968, 1972, 1976 and 1980; Elizabeth Scott in 1984; in 1992 the female candidates included Delores P. Jacobs, Gloria J. Barrett, Louise C. Harris and Elizabeth Scott. In the 1992 election, Delores P. Jacobs received one hundred five votes on the second ballot. In 1996, there were three female candidates: Gloria J. Barrett, Elizabeth Scott, and Carolyn Tyler Guidry.

The women candidates between 1964 and 1980 generally garnered few votes— Carrie Hooper's highest total was fifty-four votes on the sixth ballot in 1976. While these figures are low, the incremental increases in support over the years may have served as encouragement for those female candidates to come. Elizabeth Scott, who declared her candidacy in the four elections between 1984 and 1996, won a high of seventy-six votes

in the 1988 election. The one hundred five votes earned by Delores P. Jacobs indicated an increasing support for a female candidacy.

There is no indication that any female candidate during the period between 1964 and 1996 had a significant support base within the connection. In 1996, however, with the entry of Reverend Carolyn Tyler Guidry, a dramatic change was evidenced in the possibilities for a female candidate for bishop. Tyler Guidry, a Presiding Elder from the Los Angeles-Pasadena District of the Fifth Episcopal District, made an impressive showing with one hundred ninety votes on the first ballot and one hundred fifty-three on the third. Although her candidacy did not result in election in 1996, women saw a female candidate who demonstrated the kind of support that might mean victory in their aspirations to the episcopacy. Presiding Elder Tyler Guidry and Reverend Vashti McKenzie were the leading women candidates in the 2000 election at the AME General Conference. That year saw the election of McKenzie on the third ballot¹⁰-- a historic first that signaled the culmination of women's efforts for nearly 200 years. Tyler Guidry again was a candidate for bishop in 2004, when Linda Alford and Sarah Frances Davis joined her on the ballot. At that conference, both Davis and Guidry were elected.

The question of qualifications is consistently mentioned whenever the topic of women in the episcopacy is raised. *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* does not have much to say about the qualifications needed for election as bishop. Specifically, it reads:

¹⁰ Dennis Dickerson, "The Making of a Female Bishop: 'From Jarena Lee to Vashti Murphy McKenzie,'" *The AME Church Review* Vol. CXVI No. 378 (Summer 2000), 14; Jamye Coleman Williams, Interview by author, Atlanta, Georgia, May 10, 2006.

An itinerant elder, to be elected bishop by the General Conference, shall be blameless in character and qualifications, and must be elected by secret individual ballots of the members of the General Conference... Candidates for the Office of Bishop shall be most prudent in the method of presenting themselves and their credentials to the church.¹¹

Whereas the Discipline before 1964 stated quite clearly that no woman was to be ordained an elder in the church, the document was silent on the matter of women as bishop. The only consistency was the use of male-centered language, in which the reference was made to "he" and "him." However, this use cannot be conclusively construed as a deliberate effort to indicate a preference for males. Rather, it is usually interpreted as the traditional use of the male pronoun as universal. As it were, however, through long tradition and practice, women were excluded from holding the office of bishop. The exclusively male language, however, continued to underscore the unspoken prohibition on women as candidates for the job. Unofficially, of course, leaders and members both in and out of the AME Church have a variety of opinions as to what qualifies a person for the episcopacy. The late Reverend E. V. Hill, nationally known pastor of Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles, cited the Bible as justification for the denial of a place for women in the pulpit, not to mention the episcopacy. He was quoted by Marcia Dyson as saying:

Women can minister in the areas of singing and teaching children and other women, but I disagree that there is a biblical foundation for women preaching. There might be a rise in the popularity of women preaching, but it is not sound biblically.¹²

¹¹ *The Doctrine and Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church 2004-2008*, (Memphis: The African Methodist Episcopal Church AMEC Sunday School Union, 2005), 128.

¹² Marcia Dyson, "The Houses of Worship Our Mothers Built," *Essence* Vol. 33 Issue 1, (May 2002), 232.

Reverend Dr. Amos C. Brown, who leads the Third Baptist Church of San Francisco, says that such use of the Bible to restrict women's rights is akin to the ways white racists once used the Bible to justify first slavery and then segregation. "Can any of them show me scripture that says Negro men could preach?" he asks. "They use scripture against women today the way it was cited against Blacks during slavery."¹³

Dyson sees other reasons for the reluctance to admit women into the pulpit. The perception that church leadership has historically been one of the last refuges of power for black men persists despite the widened opportunities they enjoy in the larger society today, she says. But countering that is the fact that the black male is seen as absent from many African-American households, and the church is one place that keeps him visible and in a position of honor and respect. The black community would be loath to give up that Sunday morning display of power and authority, she says. Dyson believes, however, that the spiritual health of the black community is more vital than an imagined need to preserve the status of a few black men. The black pulpit is not "for men only," she states, and black women should not have to give up their calling out of a mistaken and misguided effort to empower black men. Nor should they have to leave their church, as some have advocated, in order to fulfill their desire to serve.

It has also been stated repeatedly that the women who ascend to the top leadership positions in the church are exceptional in nearly every way. Supporters point with pride to their supreme organizing ability, their facility of church-growing, an active and productive program of service, and the strong financial basis of their ministries. The

¹³ Ibid.

question persists whether one would find it possible to assign the same qualities and accomplishments to the majority of male ministers, presiding elders, or bishops of the church. Generally speaking, many of the men elected bishop in years past may be said to have been of fair or even lesser status. Yet their credentials were never called into question. A woman who aspired to the leadership of what is called a flagship church, to appointment as Presiding Elder, or to the episcopacy was keenly scrutinized as to her qualifications and expected to possess not only the basic but stellar qualities and abilities. This harks back to McKenzie's conclusion that a woman has to be not just as good as a man, but better in order to succeed. For example, the frequent comment made about Bishop Sarah Frances Davis is that, while a capable minister and administrator, she would never have been selected based solely on her credentials and qualifications had she been male. Yet of the twenty bishops, there is a good number of men who ascended to the post whose credentials do not approach those of Bishop Sarah Davis.

The double standard is freely acknowledged, with no apologies offered. When conversation turns to the possible women candidates for bishop in 2008, only one name is consistently offered, along with the commentary that she is an outstanding minister and preacher, leader of a great and growing church, whose demeanor and accomplishments will surely earn her a place in the episcopacy. One will not ordinarily hear a similar conversation about the male candidates or aspirants.

It is generally acknowledged – though seldom out loud – that pastors who aspire to be bishop are helped immensely if they launch their campaign from a major church. The fact that all three women bishops were assigned to a major metropolitan church early

in their careers is considered a determining factor in their elections. Carolyn Tyler Guidry was the first woman in the AME Connection to be assigned pastor of a prominent metropolitan church, and was the first serious female candidate for bishop in the entire connection. She, like the other women elected bishop, has been known throughout her entire ministry as a serious and capable minister, pastor and administrator.

Like Bishop Tyler Guidry, Vashti McKenzie had the distinction of being the first woman in her district to be made pastor of a major metropolitan church. It is unusual for new ministers to be advanced so quickly to a major church. Both Tyler Guidry and McKenzie, however, were recognized as dynamic and effective ministers. Each woman achieved a series of firsts in her ministry that distinguished her from her female peers as well as most of her male colleagues. When she decided to run for bishop, Tyler Guidry was taken seriously from the start; she was considered the first viable woman candidate for bishop, although her promising 1996 run did not lead to election in 2000 as many expected. Dr. Jamye Coleman Williams stated that Tyler Guidry was widely considered the most likely candidate to be elected in 2000 because she had made such a good showing at the previous Quadrennial in 1996. Having been "left at the door", to use a common pseudonym, Tyler Guidry was expected to build upon that positive following to win election the next time she ran. Although she made an excellent showing, she ultimately did not prevail at the 2000 General Conference.

Sarah Frances Davis was well known primarily within the state of Texas; but in that state, she was also heralded as an outstanding preacher and administrator. All three women engaged in an active community-focused ministry that resulted in phenomenal

growth of their churches and a myriad of community outreach programs. All three women also have projects that specially interest them that have brought notice and recognition from the connection. Bishop Davis is focused on prayer ministry; Bishop Tyler Guidry's special interest was in childcare; and Bishop McKenzie's specialty is black women in ministry, the focus of her two books and associated outreach programs. The women have all developed community outreach programs that serve the particular needs of the communities in which their churches are located.

These things being considered, then, the ascension of three women to the level of bishop in the twenty-first century might not be seen as quite the significant accomplishment many have determined it to be. It has been said that the male bishops had no intention of electing two women in 2004, and had only reluctantly agreed to support one female candidate in 2000. A persuasive case can therefore be made that these events occurred due to a variety of factors, not all of them— perhaps none of them— related to the desires of the church. Much of the credit can go to the women who persisted in the face of unyielding resistance to push the boundaries set on their roles in the church. Social change has also played a significant role. As women have dismantled many of the barriers to complete access and opportunity in the greater society, the religious institutions to which they belong also fell within those boundaries.

The idea that the women bishops have somehow been compromised by the very male power structure that they sought to dismantle is one that has been suggested by writers such as Patricia Hill Collins. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins posits the concept of the outsider-within, which discusses the idea that previously marginalized

persons who become a part of the oppressive system that marginalized them take on a persona of self-affirmation out of proportion to the reality of their experience. Her contention is supported by the example of black female domestic workers, who are often “adopted” by the white families for whom they work. These women become insofar as possible a member of the family in many ways, experiencing an intimacy that includes very real affection on their part for their white employers and family members which is reciprocated on the part of the white family. Nevertheless, Collins writes, these women know on a certain level “that they could never belong to their White families.”¹⁴ In reality, they are simply low-wage, exploited workers who will remain outsiders in spite of all appearances to the contrary.¹⁵ The ambiguity of their status is apparent in the dichotomy of their lived experience and their human desire to form an emotional attachment to their charges. In other words, according to Collins, these women through their access to white homes are able to see at close range the actual character and identity of these whites, allowing them to critically evaluate the reality of the supposed elite status of whites against the actual behavior and character that they display in private. These women see that the whites they work for and serve are not the superior, elite beings they profess to be. They do not have the sterling character and exalted morality that they pretend to possess out in the wider society. They are only human, and they are flawed.

The women know that these people are not their superiors in nearly every way.

The researcher sees another contradiction in this scenario, that of the white employer who professes in private to have affection for a black worker but who in public

¹⁴ Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 11.

¹⁵ Ibid.

would not consent to grant equal respect and dignity to that person. Collins states that the black domestic worker may be "well-loved" by the white family for whom she works, while she still must accept her status as a subservient, docile and unequal mammy figure. The contradictions in this evaluation should be obvious. One may, for example, feel a great deal of affection for one's farm animal, but ordinarily it would not be expected that the farm animal would be accorded the same rights and privileges as a human member of the family. In appearing to suggest that white employers feel a genuine affection for their servants, Collins risks making the reader believe that she accepts this appearance as legitimate in many ways. She does appear to mitigate this perception in her analysis of the "outsider-within" status of the black domestic employee. Collins develops the concept further in examining the demystification of racist ideology that results from these domestic workers' up-close experience of white behavior:

Accounts of black domestic workers stress the sense of self-affirmation the women experienced at seeing racist ideology demystified. . . . Taken together, black women's participation in constructing African-American culture in all-black settings and the distinctive perspectives gained from their outsider-within placement in domestic work provide the material backdrop for a unique black women's standpoint. When armed with beliefs honed in Black civil society, many Black women who found themselves doing domestic work often developed distinct views of the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies. Moreover, they often shared their ideas with other African-American women.¹⁶

The contention by the women bishops that they cannot devote their energies to the active promotion of other women to higher levels of leadership in the church is thus emblematic of Collins' theory of outsider-within. As they move into the male-dominated

¹⁶ Collins, 11.

system to which they have for so long aspired, they have found that they are not free to exercise their new power on behalf of other women. While it may be true, as Dennis Dickerson states, that the reality of exercising their duties as bishop supercedes any considerations about women's concerns, the idea that the issues should be totally eclipsed is troublesome.

Bishop McKenzie asserted that she cannot focus on women's advancement to the detriment of men because it would not be fair. She stressed that, were she a male clergy member, she would want her bishop to be fair. While this is an admirable sentiment, the fact remains that the church has a history of being unfair to women for many decades, and it might take a conscious effort to undo the damage that has been done in the past. The status of women in the church could in some ways be likened to that of African-Americans in their quest for equality in the United States. Since the advent of Affirmative Action in this country, the political tide has turned to a point where white detractors can easily and successfully circumvent its intention by crying reverse discrimination. How can it be just or fair, they argue, to discriminate against white candidates in order to give blacks a better opportunity? Is this not unfair to the whites, just as in the past it was unfair to blacks? On the surface, perhaps, this might make sense to the individual lacking discrimination. But, like so many issues that center around the concept of race in this society, such a simplistic analysis does not do justice to the question.

Affirmative Action was instituted by the U.S. government in order to rectify an historical wrong. The original idea was far from the modern interpretations and

imputations which we now recognize as Affirmative Action. The government, according to the plan, was to take affirmative action to correct the injustices of the past by making a conscious effort to include previously excluded African-American citizens in such areas as hiring, contracts, and the like. There was no intention to use specific quotas, set-asides, or to engage in special treatment. There was no consideration of lowering standards in order to award government contracts to unqualified businesses or workers. The idea was a simple one – remove the barriers to equal treatment, and make a conscious effort to seek out qualified and capable persons of African-American heritage as jobs and contracts were filled. Likewise, as the federal government removed barriers to equal access to education, to public facilities, and other aspects of life in the United States, it was not presumed that African-Americans wanted or needed any special consideration in order to have this access. Previous practices of bigotry and discrimination had not, after all, been based on qualifications, but on racial categorization. The brilliant African-American honor student had been denied entrance to institutions of higher education just as the failing African-American student had been. The talented black pianist or concert singer had been denied access to public venues just as the black singer who could not carry a tune. African-Americans had not been denied equality because of a lack of ability, but because of the color of their skin. Thus, an effort to correct this injustice was not based on anything other than equal access.

Similarly, the plight of women who wanted to enter ministry was not based on any inherent inferiority on their part, but on the prejudice and bias of a male-dominated system and the gender-biased traditions of society that restricted women to a lesser status

than men. The goal of dismantling this system, then, should not be looked upon with suspicion, no matter who the agent of change might chance to be. Many African-Americans lament the fact that the results of integration have not been more positive. In many areas of life, integration has caused a deterioration of black life in its cultural aspects despite certain material gains. Adults who were educated in segregated schools point out that such schools were often more nurturing, caring and successful despite substandard materials and infrastructure, staffed with black professionals who sought the very best for their students. Neighborhoods were close-knit, they say, with everyone looking out for one another; children truly were raised by a "village," in the sense that a community understood the necessity to unite against a larger danger from the larger society. Those who were the first to integrate formerly segregated schools sometimes wonder if the pain and sacrifice they endured were worth it. The original purpose of integration was not simply to sit next to a white child, but to have access to the books, facilities, and opportunities that a quality education provided. Remembering the hostility and often life-threatening dangers they faced in the effort to acquire these rights makes some wonder if their sacrifice was in vain. One respondent recalled the lax morality she encountered on entering a formerly all-white university, stating that many things that were permitted there would never have been tolerated at an Historically Black College or University. In addition, she remembered, the formation of contacts and business networks enjoyed by her white classmates, carrying over from the university into the business and professional worlds, did not happen for her.

The idea of the outsider-within, then, who covers the system in order to gain access is in some respects applicable to the situation of the women bishops. The constraints that they feel against taking an active part in the advancement of women in the church is very problematic. One surmises that male bishops face no such restraint; those who actively support women's advancement in the church do not appear to face any significant levels of approbation. Those who have stood up for women's access and inclusion continue to do so. It seems that only the women who have achieved success in the church are constrained from reaching back to bring other women along. Perhaps these women are concerned that continued efforts on behalf of women might make them appear to be biased. If that is the case, one must question the price they have paid and the extent to which they have truly advanced women's cause. A new question must then be posed about the status of women in the church. In attaining the episcopacy, they appear to have lost some of the essence of what they were before they arrived – advocates for the proposition that there should be no limits or barriers to women's achievement in the church based solely on gender. Anything less will serve only to perpetuate the male-dominated patriarchal system that succeeded for more than two hundred years in placing limits and restrictions on women's full equality in the church. The fear that prevents women who ascend to the episcopacy from continuing their advocacy for women's equality in the church is detrimental to the effort to remove issues of gender bias in the church. Women in this instance should be just as free as men to advocate and agitate for the continued progress of women's equality. The idea that upon attainment of a position of authority, a woman must cease to strive for women's advancement does harm to the

church at several levels. The women who have achieved this level must be fearless in the face of accusations of bias, that they are using their position to advance other women.

There should be no problem with doing just that.

Finally, one should not routinely discount the reasoning of Bishop Sarah Frances Davis, who avers that we cannot account for the intentions of God. Where God wants a woman, she suggested, a woman will be placed, despite whatever limitations men may seek to put upon her.

Recommendations

The undertaking of this investigation suggested a number of avenues of inquiry and research that will further the body of knowledge available as related to the topic of the women bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. One compelling aspect of future study will continue and perhaps complete what this research has begun. It would be beneficial to undertake a new investigation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in several years to learn what impact these three women bishops have had on the presence of women in leadership positions. Specific questions that should be addressed at that time might include an investigation into the extent to which the incidence of women in leadership has increased by the time of the new study; how many female candidates the women bishops have selected for promotion in the intervening years; what criteria women bishops have used in selecting candidates for presiding elder, for appointment to new charges, and in choosing whether to support female candidates for bishop. Furthermore, it would be of interest to learn to what extent the election of these three women widened opportunities for women in leadership. How many women, in real

numbers, have occupied the bishopric in the intervening years? Bishops are elected once every four years in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, at the quadrennial General Conference, and the number of openings varies depending upon the number of bishops set to retire or who have left office for other reasons. As the next Quadrennial Session is slated for 2008, a timely study following that conference will answer the question of whether the election of other women will follow the last two elections.

In addition to the above questions, an investigation into the changes, if any, in perceptions and attitudes toward women in ministry on the part of both the church and American society might yield results that would help to clarify many of the questions that have accompanied women's efforts toward equality in the church. Speculation abounds that the recent elections of women to the episcopacy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was both unexpected and unwelcome to a majority of the male leadership. Future research might determine the extent to which this assertion is true. Has the male leadership of the church demonstrated a more positive attitude towards women and their aspirations, or has the tenor of the church remained essentially the same?

As Carpenter observed, a large part of the problem faced by women who enter ministry is rooted in the way society has been indoctrinated to think of religious leadership. Subconsciously, most of society has been oriented toward thinking of God as a male figure. The effort has been undertaken to change the male-centered bias in the church, a change that has been perceived as needed in most of society, and not just in the church. In the space of a decade or less, it might be possible to see whether the efforts of womanists and feminists have made any significant gains in altering public perception of

the clergy. In several denominations, women have been ordained as ministers for decades. In some, women have been elected elders and bishops and have served capably, if not with distinction. The passage of a generation in which female clergy is an accepted fact of life, and in which female leadership of the black church is no longer an extraordinary occurrence, might give researchers new insights into the social perception of church leadership. In years past, young women could not conceive of a woman as the head of the church, and the fact that it is a common occurrence in the church of the twenty-first century could manifest itself in acceptance of this fact as nothing out of the ordinary in future generations. As Carpenter stated, social and psychological freedom from gender "as a defining factor" in church leadership will be necessary for women—and society—to make significant progress toward equality for women within the church.

Similarly, Carpenter's contention that lay women have almost unlimited potential for advocacy through sheer numbers and level of financial support may be unfounded for two reasons—women are as entrenched in the patriarchal structuring of American society as men. Secondly, women must move into a greater number of positions of leadership and authority in order to wield any real power to make these or any other changes. In most churches, the numbers of female leaders needed are simply not there. The majority of trustees, stewards, auxiliary heads, and other officers of the church are usually male. Furthermore, Carpenter's own observation that the Scriptures remain a bastion of sexist interpretation is perhaps the biggest hurdle to be overcome. Carpenter asserts that the scriptures themselves serve to oppress women and under gird a sexist and limiting environment. She goes on to say that African-Americans are bound by gender

identification in relation to church leadership to such an extent that it has proven a detriment to their social and psychological (religious) freedom.¹⁷

All three women bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church state that they do not intend to use their position to promote women indiscriminately. They insist that they will strive to be even-handed and gender-neutral in the selection of candidates for advancement. They assert, however, that they are always cognizant of the unique positions they occupy in furthering the cause of women in ministry, albeit without showing favoritism. As Bishop McKenzie phrased this sentiment, "I'm called to pastor those men *and* women... You have to show people that you're fair ...because if it was reversed, I would want my bishop to be fair."¹⁸ Considering the long struggle women have undertaken to reach the episcopacy, the question remains whether the three who have achieved that status will make an effort to bring more women along.

In some respects, the dilemma of the church is akin to the secular issue of affirmative action. If Bishops McKenzie, Tyler Guidry, and Davis are the forerunners of equal opportunity for women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, it remains to be seen to what extent they are representative of the women who would follow them. One might question whether they have been singled out because of extraordinary qualifications, or if they have been held to standards equal to those of their male counterparts. Much has been made of the outstanding qualifications of these three women, of their activism, their determination, and their ability to accomplish their objectives. Future female candidates could well be expected to be the same "super"

¹⁷ Carpenter, Ibid.

¹⁸ Vashti Murphy McKenzie, Interview by the Author, tape recording, Atlanta, Georgia, May 18, 2006.

pastors and leaders in order to achieve similar status. Bishop McKenzie writes in *Not Without A Struggle* that one could compare the situation of women in the church with the situation of African-Americans in this society – women who would succeed in the church must be better than, not equal to, a man in order to achieve the same consideration, just as African-Americans often believe they must surpass the qualifications of whites in order to receive equal opportunities. Whether this is true will be determined by the degree to which future female aspirants to leadership meet or exceed the personal qualities of these three pioneers and, indeed, which achievement level is expected of them.

A second, equally compelling investigation might focus on the men in leadership of the African Methodist Episcopal Church who assisted women in ministry in their struggle to expand the roles assigned to them and to enter into the hierarchy of the church. Forward-looking male leaders have endeavored to render support and opportunity to the women of the church, despite the opposition of their brothers.

Although several prominent male theologians— James Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, C. Eric Lincoln and Deotis Roberts— have addressed the issue of women's equality in the black church, Carpenter and others believe not enough sympathetic men in leadership have served as effective advocates for the inclusion of more women and a dismantling of the barriers. Although she suggests that women work to identify and develop sympathy among such men, it is possible that they will not find much in the way of support and sympathy from the present leadership. However, as the older generation of bishops is replaced with younger and more progressive prelates, it could be expected that the general philosophy of the church leader will change significantly. An investigation into

the personal theologies of the men who offered such support and encouragement, and how these efforts intersect with the theologies of liberation so prevalent in the black church would be a productive endeavor which would add a significant body of knowledge to this area of research.

The idea that the women bishops are constrained from helping other women to advance out of suspicion of favoritism is an area that also needs to be researched further. An interesting study might examine the viewpoints of both male and female membership about the women bishops' actions regarding women, each woman bishop's record of appointments and advancements, and the perceptions of the church membership about the intersection of the two. The researcher is interested in determining to what extent these concerns exist in the minds of the women bishops, and to what extent they are expressing sentiments of those who have voiced an opinion about their actions. In other words, are the women bishops responding to concerns that church members or leaders have expressed to them, or are they overly cautious about an appearance of nepotism that they fear may exhibit itself if they continue on the path upon which they have embarked? This also raises the question of women's intentions as they engage in the effort to advance women's position in the church. Has this effort been directed at all women, or did the women who gained the episcopacy think only in terms of their own advancement? One cannot assume that a woman who believes she deserves advancement necessarily believes this opportunity should be available to all women. Presiding Elder Lonnie Wormley's words in his Special Resolution at the AME General Conference of 2000 are hauntingly evocative of this attitude. Wormley pointed out that one of the fiercest

opponents of affirmative action is an African-American, a man who himself benefited from the earliest programs establishing affirmative action. This man now does all he can to dismantle the entire program. Wormley's resolution seeks to address that contradiction:

Whereas Black people were enraged when the proposition 209 was on the ballot to deny set-aside for minorities. They further cried "Set back" when the proposition passed. This proposition denied racial set-asides for minority students in California Universities. This was a setback to minorities. Ironically, none other than a black man authored the proposition. He was in position to advance equality but he chooses to set it back.¹⁹

Actually, Presiding Elder Wormley misinterpreted the actual meaning of the proposition that established affirmative action, for it was not designed to set aside any slots for minority students. Rather, the intent was to make a serious effort to seek out qualified students of all races for admission to the state's universities. Like many such issues, however, emotionalism has overtaken reality and most of the public believes – erroneously – that the purpose and practice of affirmative action is to provide for the admission of any minority student no matter his or her qualifications. Despite the fact that this is not the case, this is nonetheless the impression most of the public holds. In similar fashion, many members of the black church persist in their belief that a woman simply is not qualified to lead the church, and that any effort to make it possible for her to do so must necessarily provide exceptional concessions to enable her to do so. Bishop McKenzie's *Not Without A Struggle* stated that a woman must be not only as good as a

¹⁹ Clement W. Fugh, *Minutes of the Forty-Sixth Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Cincinnati, Ohio, July 5-11, 2000, p. 283.

man, but better, in order to receive the same consideration. Many African-Americans can relate to this sentiment, for it has been an example of folk wisdom among black Americans for decades. It is imperative that this kind of thinking is not allowed to end the opportunities women have gained through their hard work and struggle over hundreds of years. Forward-looking men and women of the church must do all they can to ensure that this does not happen.

It has been suggested that the women who fought so fiercely for the right to gain the episcopacy may be uninterested in helping to bring other women along to the positions they have achieved. This researcher continues to doubt the validity of this supposition. Perhaps, however, future research will determine its truth by investigating the way the first three women bishops have utilized their positions, and whether they have indeed assisted other women in advancing in the church.

This research has taken up the investigation of women and power in the African Methodist Episcopal Church where earlier scholars left off. In *Engendering Church*, Jualynne Dodson discussed the ways women had carved out a space for themselves in a church that did not welcome their desire to serve. This study has continued that investigation, looking at ways women have used the access and power won by their long struggle to achieve positions in the leadership of the church. Future studies should continue the investigation into the extent to which the stained glass ceiling has been broken.²⁰

²⁰ Popularized by earlier feminist theologians, this phrase was utilized by Vashti McKenzie on the occasion of her election in 2000, and by writers and scholars since then. Attribution to the originator of this term is not possible.

In the process of this study, the researcher found that both churches and research institutions such as libraries lack a complete record of many of the historic achievements and advances of women in the church. A further recommendation is for the establishment of a special archivist – if not at individual churches, then at the headquarters of the denomination – in order to keep records of significant events in the advancement of women in the church. A compilation of data chronicling women's progress in the African Methodist Episcopal Church would be invaluable to future researchers and scholars.

APPENDIX A

IF NOT NOW WHEN

Rev. Lonnie C. Wormley, Presiding Elder, Los Angeles District

Resolution to Set Aside

Whereas minorities have had the yoke of discrimination as their crown since time forward. Martyrs have paid the price for their freedom for the advancement of equal rights. The AME Church was in the forefront championing this cause. Advancement is being accomplished as new leaders assume the opportunity to carry forth the baton that has been relayed to them. Let us recommend to them guidance by the divine spirit.

Whereas call to that those who are free have the power to set the captive free.

And Whereas those whose stomachs are full are in power to feed those who are hungry.

In like manner the male clergy must take the lead in ushering in a new day for female clergy persons.

And Whereas the AME Church with all the accolades as titleholders for social equality limits these qualities to men only. Hypocritically sermons are preached relating to inclusiveness, which includes race, rich and poor etc, but not the effeminate gender. The church does not practice what it preaches. On the one hand it is adamant for the inclusiveness of races of people, but not inclusive of the feminine agenda in the ecclesiastic circle.

Whereas Why should the scale of justice be favorable to men only?

Whereas Black people were enraged when the proposition 209 was on the ballot to deny set-aside for minorities. They further cried "Set back" when the proposition passed. This proposition denied racial set-asides for minority students in California Universities. This was a setback to minorities. Ironically, none other than a black man authored the proposition. He was in position to advance equality but he chooses to set it back.

Whereas If one black man can turn the clock back, certainly, the black church can remove the glass ceiling for all of its members including women,

And Whereas The AME has been sitting on the egg of equality for over two [hundred] years. [It is] time for that egg to hatch

Whereas A span of 24 years have passed six quadrennials is it not time to enact the set-aside to elect a bishop [who just happens] to be a woman?

APPENDIX B

**GENERAL CONFERENCE
AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
SPECIAL RESOLUTION
JULY, 2000**

In this, the first General conference of the new century and the new millennium, we are called to remember that African Methodism was born as a protest against injustice, and we as heirs of this great tradition call for an end to gender bias in the hierarchy of our Church. We call for the full inclusion of women as decision and policy makers at the highest level of our Church, the bishopric. We do this in the name of God in whom there is neither East nor West, North nor South, male nor female.

It is in this spirit that Women in Ministry, the Connectional Lay Organization, a host of delegates—men and women—and many other AME's do submit for your approval this Special Resolution:

WHEREAS, The struggle of women for inclusion, parity, and equity extends from 1817 and Jarena Lee; to 1940 and Martha Keys' fight for ordination; to 1948 and 1960 when the Church made the ordination of women lawful, first as deacons and finally as itinerant elders; and

WHEREAS, Women in the Church, as in the case of Blacks in the larger society, have been submerged in anonymity in the church hierarchy; and

WHEREAS, Women occupy a unique position in our society, constituting more than half of the population, controlling a larger percentage of the wealth, and accounting for the majority of church membership and seminary enrollment; and

WHEREAS, At the 1995 meeting of the General Board in St. Louis, MO, a resolution was introduced and passed that a woman be elected to the bishopric, in 2000; and

WHEREAS, At the 1996 General Conference Bishop Frank Cummings, speaking for the bench of bishops in the Episcopal Address, recommended that the Church elect a woman to the bishopric in the future; and

WHEREAS, The Connectional Lay Executive Board in November, 1998, endorsed a resolution to elect a woman to the bishopric at the General Conference of 2000; and

WHEREAS, The Connectional Lay Organization in its 26th Biennial in July, 1999, affirmed the action of its Executive Board; and

WHEREAS, The United Methodist Church in 1984 elected Leontine Kelly as the first African American bishop of a major religious denomination; and

WHEREAS, The Episcopal church in 1989 broke a 500-year tradition of Anglican church history when it elevated Barbara C. Harris to the bishopric; and

WHEREAS, The Nation of Islam in 1999 defied a 1400 year-old Muslim custom when Minister Louis Farrakhan named a woman – Sister Ava Muhammed – to lead the group's Southern Region; and

WHEREAS, In 1984 the African Methodist Episcopal Church wisely and fairly included on the slate of bishops to be elected one of our overseas brothers; and

WHEREAS, We in African Methodism who profess to be a liberating and reconciling Church can no longer engage in gender bias; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That this 46th Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church instruct the Episcopal Committee that in its recommendation of the number of bishops to be elected one shall be a woman.

Rev. Sandra S. Blair, President, Women in Ministry
Mr. J. L. Williams, President, Connectional Lay Organization
Dr. Jamye Coleman Williams, Retired, General Officer

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